

JREMMIN

A NOVEL



BENJAMIN DIRXIN

North : Beayulah : Land
South : Ocean : Water
West : Void : Wind
East : Din : Fire





JREMMiN





A Partial *Low Isthisan* – *English* Glossary

-’m: am

-’s: us, as

-’ven: even

Ah/a’-: of, to

Abobra: a type of gourd

Aday: today (informal)

Aerosphere: atmosphere

Aetos Kaukonen: of myth,
Heron-headed god of
thunder

After: afternoon [Eng. meaning
retained]

Akdar: type of green citrus fruit

Albion: of myth, central figure
of Albionism

Allabody: everybody

Allaone: everyone

Allathing: everything

Allo: garlic

Älo: hello

Alvays: always

Amphibian: one of four races
on Jremmin

An’: and

Anadon: one of the seven
galactic empires

Anight: tonight

Antagna: antagonism

Anulter: another

Anyvays: anyways

Arachnid: one of four races on
Jremmin

Ardis: of myth, holy mountain
of the gods

Av: from

Avay: away

B’-: but

Bassador: ambassador

Be: is

Be’s: be us

Beayulah/Yulah: of myth, a
type of heaven

Been: was

Bihu: pronghorn forest gecko

Bit: a unit of time, similar to a
minute

Bloodnut: hard-shelled, red-
fleshed fruit of a desert
palm, similar to a
coconut

Bomination: abomination

Bout: about

Brüth: brother (informal)

Brüzzen: brother (formal)

Byre: of cosmology, a region
comprised of the
totality of earthly
realms

C’nay: conj., cannot

Cannay: cannot

Capitch: capitulate

Cassalandra, Zalman: of
history, Isthisian royal
explorer, court
cartographer of Levi II,
playwright

Cause: because

Cern: concern, discern

Charista: charismatic person
(plural)

Charisto: charismatic person
(singular)

Choronzon: of myth, demon

Clamb: climbed

Compied: comprehended

Compy: comprehend

Cross: across

Cycle: unit of time, equivalent
to 2.029 Earth years

Dahi: a type of yogurt

Dath: does
De / d'-: Do
Ded: did
Deffin: definite
Dem: them
Differn: different
Dilemics: dialectical polemics
Dillige: diligence
Din: of myth, otherworldly
 chaos realm
Dolences: condolences
Duce: produce/induce
Eagret, the: of myth, bird
Eddy: edge
Egregore: of myth &
 cosmology, a type of
 demon, most illustrious
 servants of the Noise,
 see: Noise, the
Em: the Ocean's name
Enitharmon: of myth,
 emanation of the spirit
 of Creation, represents
 beauty, inspiration,
 and pity
Esox: species of fish, similar to
 a pike
Fauxpathy: false apathy
Fend: offend
Fer: for
Ficial: official
Fide: confide
Filly: girl
Flower, Molly: of myth, the
 Ocean's daughter
Fore: before
Frain: refrain
Freshments: refreshments
Gagtungr: of myth, demon
Garum: fermented fish sauce
Gether: together
Gleipnir: of myth, chain used
 to bind Choronzon
Gon: going

Goyra: species of sizeable
 lizard, found in desert
Gret: regret
Grompers: potatoes
Gwine: arachnid "queen,"
 community or social
 leader, always female
Haps: perhaps
Här: her
Hark: listen
Harkener: listener
Allafter: after all
Hath: has
Hez: his
-in: -ing
Inna: into
Is: It is
Isthis: most powerful of the
 seven galactic empires,
 ruled by the Levis
Izda: obscene, a terrible
 person
Jigger: design, engineer
Kanga: species of chicken-like
 bird
Kin: kind, group, type
Kinlin: children
Komavel: welcome
Korangar: of myth, the
 apocalypse, the end of
 all things
Kül: type of green fruit, similar
 to a plum
Lieve: believe
Lingua: language
Lithoria: one of the seven
 galactic empires
Luvah: of myth, one of the
 Four Cosmic Zoas,
 represents the highest
 form of Love
Madoqua: species of very
 small, forest-dwelling,
 horned deer

Magine: imagine
Maha: one of the seven galactic empires
Me: my
Mekkins: machinations
Miliar: familiar
Milostivo: gracious (formal)
Misfortunate: unfortunate
Moosh(a): mice
Mung: among
Mungst: amongst
Munity: community
Mushuk: feline
Mÿrda: murder
Na / n'-: no
Nada: nothing
Nado: tornado
Nauris: turnip
Nay: not
Nayaone: no one
Nayth: none
Neath: beneath
Nepastra: Neptunium
Noise, the: ~~the noise of the~~ ~~the noise of the~~ ~~the noise of the~~ ~~the noise of the~~
Normous: enormous
Nowaday: today (formal)
Numb: number
Oamen: O
Obtensity: obsequiousness
Ocean, the: ☺
Öd: of myth, region of Byre from which Thaum Zeyendez hails, see: 'Zeyendez, Thaum'
Omni: many
Ow: how
Phibian: shortened, see: 'amphibian'
Plosion: explosion
Polly: sorry
Pomidor: tomato
Portunity: opportunity
Promptest: first-thing
Propriated: appropriated

Prosal: proposal
Pseudo: not actually
Putation: reputation
Quences: sequences
Rachnid: shortened, see: 'arachnid'
Recentest: most recent
Reckonize: recognize
Rennial: perennial
Rhetoricisms: sayings, statements, or arguments of a rhetorical nature
Rintrah: of myth, demon, Lord of Din
Rive: arrive
Round: around [Eng. meaning retained]
S': some
Sa: saw
Sageberry: a fragrant species of berry
Said: told
Sape: shortened, see: 'sapien'
Sapien: one of four races on Jremmin
Sär: sir
Say: tell
Sayeth/Say'th: tells
Sayin: telling
Sciencer: scientist
Scribble: write
Scuse: excuse
Selino: celery
Septarian: a person, place, or thing either originating from, aligned with, or relating to the Septumvirate
Septumvirate, the: ruling galactic confederacy, consisting of seven distinct galactic empires

Seven, the: alt. name, the
 Septumvirate, see:
 'Septumvirate, the'
Sez: says
Sh'-: should
Shadanakar: of myth, alt.
 name, Byre, see: 'Byre'
Shaygon: of myth, see: 'Void,
 the'
Shon: should
Sidder: consider
Sific: specific
Sim: shortened, see: 'simian'
Simian: one of four races on
 Jremmin
Sinker: a unit of weight, similar
 to an ounce
Sistant: assistant
Sitch: situation
Skimmy: play
Spake: said
Spaken: say
Span: a unit of time, similar to
 a millennia
Speck: see
Spetchly/speshly: especially
Spesh: special
Sphere: planet
Spise: despise
Spose: suppose
Squablin: a baby bird
Sume: assume
Sumn: something
Svell: swell
Sylem: capital city of Isthis,
 located on Ülba
Tena: a type of pepper
Tend: attend [Eng. meaning
 retained]
Tention: intention/attention
Thad: that
Thentic: authentic
Thon: their
Tremendo: tremendous

Troduce: introduce
Trosity: monstrosity
Ulder: other
Ungol: spider
Us: we
Vay: way
Vell: well
Vha: what (antiquated)
Vhel: while
Vhelst: whilst
Vhen: when
Vhence: whence
Vhenever: whenever
Vhere: where
Vherever: wherever
Vish: wish
Vissin: vicinity
Vith: with
Vithout: without
Void, the:
Vy: why
Wa: what
We: I
Ya: you (singular)
Ye: you (plural)
Yea: yes
Yestereve: last night
Yie: your (antiquated)
Yer: your (singular)
Yon: your (formal/plural)
Yonside: outside
Zactly: exactly
Zeyendez, Thaum: of myth,
 heroic first ruler of the
 legendary city of
 Katharsis
Zoa: (1) of myth, any of the
 four supreme cosmic
 beings representing
 different aspects of
 creation; (2) of history,
 a legislative title
Zosima: chief Zoa [in the
 historic sense]

“Jremmin” is a name with two separate meanings: (1) it is a planet, and (2) it is a village built on said planet.

The latter was established as one of ~15,000 colonies spread across the inhospitable, outer region of the inhabited galaxy as part of a mass-terraformation plan called the “Initiative.”

Craft were sent to selected semi-habitable planets and buried electromagnetic coils under their ice caps. These coils were supposed to have generated enough heat to melt the ice and release the water and gases trapped beneath. The expectation was that this would alter each planets’ atmosphere so that, in ~50 Standard Isthisian Cycles, the planets would become habitable.

Then, near the equator of every planet, one of a type of massive nuclear reactor known as an “Engine” was constructed to power these coils. And near the Engine of every planet, a colony of a few thousand settlers each was established in order to provide maintenance to the Engine.

However, as quickly as it began, the Initiative was abandoned, as were all colonies founded thereby.

Most settlers were not retrieved, and thus perished.

No official explanation was given.

PROLOGUE

i

The muffled sound of what could be mistaken for a swarm of clicking insects was audible from the backroom. A collection of three-dozen-and-some clocks were hanging on the inside of the wall which divided it from the front of the building. She loved the sound they made, ticking at different speeds and in accordance with the rotations of whichever planet she had assigned them to. Each had two small, silver plaques stacked below, the top with the name of a city and the bottom with that of the planet on which each listed city stood.

It was dusk in Sylem.

She turned her attention back to the budget for the coming subcycle spread out across her desk.

Her tea was cool.

She heard two customers entering from the street, ringing the bell which hung over the door. They spoke in a language she did not recognize. One's voice was deeper than that of the other.

Their tone was struck by enthusiasm, she assumed upon noticing Grant who was covering the register for Hunner. Hunner had departed earlier that afternoon to take part in the street fair one block over. She had told him to get back an hour before closing, knowing it would be a half-hour.

She could hear their camera shutter followed by Grant's deep growl of displeasure.

She gathered that they came from an impoverished background and seemed to have met through familial ties. Each seemed trusting of the other, laughter quaking beneath every syllable. They remained close as they moved through the showroom,

their gurgling voices dropping in volume until they were nearly whispering to each other.

She stopped what she was doing and shut her eyes as to listen and decipher, but was distracted by a *thud* from over by the cabinet.

The slender, blue-skinned creature which Hunner had adopted the previous cycle had collided with a leg of furniture while pursuing a moth. It had been giving chase all evening, and reminded her of a falling rug the way it flung itself about and flopped onto the hardwood floor again and again. It shook its head and straightened its back while regaining its balance.

Hunner had named it 'Bynxbee.'

She had become fond of Bynxbee.

Bynxbee noticed her staring from her desk, and the higher-pitched of the two voices out in the showroom laughed, and she decided that their presence was of little concern.

"*Bynxbeeeee*," she sang.

Bynxbee's ears perked up. They got to their feet and sauntered over to her.

She pushed her chair back and, lowering herself onto her knees, placed one hand to the floorboard and, with the other, began stroking the animal's smooth, hairless hide, careful to avoid the quills which were in need of a trim.

Bynxbee purred.

Her hairs stood on end.

She did not look at the clocks.

Her watch ticked from its pocket.

ii

Hunner was following her through the store's many shelved stacks of rare books and wrote with a pencil onto a notepad as she got ready to depart. He was worried because he had returned from

the street fair later than he said he would but, she assured him while pulling on her gloves, that it was not that big of a deal.

‘Besides,’ she said, speaking in their mutual tongue, ‘the customers love Grant.’

‘Yeah,’ Hunner replied, ‘but he doesn’t like working the register.’ The graphite of the pencil with which he was writing snapped. ‘He doesn’t understand what half of them are saying.’ He pulled another from out of his back pocket. ‘It makes him nervous.’

‘Do *you* understand what half of them are saying?’

‘Maybe half. But it doesn’t bother me like it does him.’ He stopped writing as she pulled her arms through the sleeves of her leather coat. ‘Bet you yourself can barely even tell anymore.’

She stopped. ‘What they’re saying?’

He laughed. ‘Whether you can *tell* what they’re saying.’

She did not laugh.

He cleared his throat. ‘Any new orders?’ he asked.

‘No,’ she replied, buttoning her sleeves as she looked around at the shelves, most of which were at partial capacity. ‘Not for now at least.’ She looked down. ‘We’ll need another university or collector or...’ She checked her pockets to make sure she had everything. ‘...museum or what-have-you-’

Her eyes went blank.

‘Everything okay?’ Hunner asked.

‘I’m fine.’ She produced her pocket-watch and opened it.

‘Any idea what you’ll be seeing tonight?’

‘I don’t know.’ She snapped it shut. ‘Whatever looks good.’ Her head snapped around, its eyes checking every nook and corner. ‘You know the new combination for the safe, right?’

He rattled off a series of numbers to which she did not listen.

iii

She passed more and more broken windows the closer she got to the theater. It was her favorite one to go to because of the outdated projectors. The people who ran the place had taken to her and permitted her to go up into the booth whenever she liked. She went up there often and toyed around with the machinery after the film was over and performed whatever maintenance was required.

She looked across the empty parking lot of cracked asphalt and crawling ivy towards the row of spindly palmettos which stood on the other side. They reached high into the sky and well over the tops of every nearby building.

The sky was red and the sun was setting.

iv

She felt the buzzing of the posters which hung on the theater façade in her nasal cavity.

She had stopped checking to see what was playing ahead of time a while ago and had rarely failed to settle for something.

She came before the first poster and saw that it was for one which she had already seen two visits prior: an Isthisian action-drama about three brothers, the eldest being a wise doctor; the middle, a drug-addled preacher; and the youngest, a clever ex-pirate, and a scheme they hatch to steal the prize money from a boxing tournament, all-the-while unawares that the headlining contender is the son of a crime-lord trying to rig the outcome.

She had enjoyed it, but wanted to see what that week's newest feature was, so she moved on to the second poster which was for another one that she had also previously seen. It had been billed as a comedy and featured an all-invertebrate cast, though it was more truthfully of a genre which, as far as she knew, lacked any common categorization. The filmmaking industry of the system in which it was made was still-fledgling. Even with the translation

earpiece the ticket booth had provided, its story was difficult to follow. The characters swapped names at random intervals and the actors broke the fourth wall in ways which did not seem to be intentional. Whilst this granted the film a peculiar, albeit frustrating, sense of authenticity, she suspected that a second viewing would yield little of any greater value and thus continued on.

She crossed the ticket booth and saw the owner's sister-in-law inside, reading a newsletter through eyes like those of a chameleon. Though they had not yet been introduced to one another, each was vaguely aware of who the other was, and both took notice and smiled, and she nodded and waved without slowing down.

Then, passing the poster for the headlining feature, she halted, and then did not move for quite some time.

Flashy the way that posters for state-sponsored films always were, it featured, as its central focus-point, the hexagonal Obsidian Pyramid of Decengnwel atop that same city's darkened skyline. Characters filled the surrounding spaces and margins, many outfitted in military uniforms that had recently fallen out of style.

The buzzing ushered her closer; she focused on their faces.

Many on one side of the poster were Lithorian. Most of the others were a mixed smattering of Isthisian (maybe Mahawni) and Thralien. On the far right, three actors portraying Whiteguard nuzzled their chiseled faces against the collars of their big fur coats.

She could tell which of the Lithorians was supposed to be Hersair, and a shiver ran up her spine.

v

She found her way to her usual seat, sat down, and had a look around.

A few of the other regulars were there. She noticed the patron with a head like a shovel, who she always made a point of waving to, seated two rows behind her, and waved to them. The

dark, ovular eyes perched atop the upper corners of their head gazed at her before turning back towards the screen.

Turning likewise, her body settled in.

She sighed and shook her head.

She felt cold when the lights went down.

She took out her pocket-watch, opened it, pressed the button which dispensed a tiny, white, circular pill into the center of her other palm, placed that pill on her tongue, felt it dissolve until it was gone, and then she put her watch away.

It was dark.

The projector came to life above.

vi

The chameleon-eyed woman at the ticket booth flipped through an article in the previous day's newsletter about criminals on her home planet: naughty, depraved youths doing things like attacking the less fortunate with chains and thieving from privately-owned businesses. Such articles always ended with a brief description of the punishments administered upon these malcontents with their subsequent executions carried out by firing squad, guillotine, electrical shock, poison, cannon, being fed to some kind of carnivorous lifeform, excessive lobotomy (whenever it was warranted to do so), or *other*. These descriptions used to be longer, but the editors saw fit to shorten them. No explanation was offered for this decision, though it was, in reality, because these sections proved unpopular with the general readership who were mostly interested in the crimes committed and the personal lives of those who committed them.

A figure was sitting across the street from the theater on a public bench.

She tried to ignore them.

vii

She sunk into her chair and crossed her arms.

Within the film's story, the main cast thus far were all Thralien rebels stationed on the southern shore of Marlhyde.

The leading couple (played by actual Thrاليens) exchanged poorly-written dialogue in the morning-lit opening on the banks of a rainforest delta.

She settled in further.

He stood atop the edge of his canoe and held her slender, smooth-skinned, albino hands in his and swore to her that he would never let anything bad ever happen to her.

She felt herself growing steadily more tired and became aware of an increasing boredom.

seven cycles

She yawned and thought once more of the flower that was once placed in her hand.

about sixteen years on jremmin

She was still asking herself the same old questions.

She thought of her pills and had to remind herself that she had taken one already.

She breathed in deeply. Her eyes were half open.

The young couple embraced just before the screen faded to a high angle above the center of their camp. The camera hovered lower. It closed in on a carriage being pulled by Isthisian-bred cattle. A cut to the inside of the carriage revealed an older Thralien male, jostled from underneath by the unevenness of the dirt road. He was reading, with urgency, a piece of parchment in his hands.

She closed her eyes and tightened the crossing of her arms. Her head then slumped onto her shoulder and, soon, she was back on the island's rocky shore where they always began, watching the waves crash in.

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BOOK I



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1

Zoa Aphremn listened to the hither-and-thithering waters under the wharf beneath his feet whilst the other three zoas bickered further up the dock.

“D’we’ve read wa?”

“The prosal we sent a’ya.”

“Wa prosal?”

“Me prosal thad sumn be done bout the seepage a’deadly poison av th’lower chamber a’th’Engine. Me prosal thad us prevent the soil av bein possibly tainted. *Thad prosal.*”

“Ah,” said Nethen, arms crossed and looking out over the water. “We d’nay read thad.”

Aphremn removed from his chest pocket one of three cigarettes he had rolled for himself the night before, and he began searching for his matches.

In his direction, Ömis shouted: “*We can take na more a’dis!*”

“Yea, ya can,” he replied.

“*Most izda-like be he!*”

“If y’are gon a’nsult we a’me face,” Nethen spat, “d’we the favor a’speakin in *plain words* wa be vith y’and the Engine anyway. Never been it a cause fer vexin fore. Vhy now?”

“Nepastra,” Ömis replied.

Nethen scowled. “Thad a phibian cantation?”

“*Nyagh!*” Ömis snarled, directing his webbed forefinger at Nethen’s face. “D’nay diffuse dis vith yer obtensity! Vith yer fauxpathy! Vith yer-”

“Avay a’me face!” Nethen shouted, slapping Ömis’ hand away. “If ya seek a’win me, we beg ya de so *milostivo.*”

“Ömis hath fided in us,” said Verhär, stepping between the two of them. “hez concern thad a element mung th’Engine’s matters could be- uh... *propriated* a’fashion some kin a’weapon?” The fur at the end of the Simian zoa’s tail brushed against Ömis’ face, aggravating the portly amphibian’s allergies,

“Is undeniable,” Ömis grumbled before sucking the excess mucus to the back of his gills.

“He spake there be a- a *substance* a’some kin vchich could be used a’make some manner ah - oh... some manner ah *bomb* vith?”

Nethen staggered. “*Bomb?* Wa bomb? Who said ya thad?!”

Ömis faced him. “Been the science team av Isthis in thon recentest missive. They-” His eyes widened as he inhaled. “*If ya read me prosal ya’d know all a’dis!*”

“Ya have hez ear,” Aphremn called out, continuing the search for his matches, “say him wa ya said Verhär and we.”

Lowering his hands with unease, shaking his head and straightening out the front of his brown tweed vest, Ömis cleared his airways and stated: “Nepastra been found seepin up neath the dirt round th’Engine. Been made plain a’m me thad dis substance be toxic and capable a’cumulatin in the bones a’livin animals.”

“Ow much?”

“Ow much wa?”

“Ow much been in the soil?”

“They found trace ‘mounts.”

“*Trace ‘mounts?!’*” Nethen chittered, indignant.

“There be more down neath!” Ömis replied.

“Hark, Nethen!” Aphremn intoned. “W’Ömis hath a’spoken be worthy harkin ah!”

Wrapping his laughter in a sigh, Nethen rolled his eyes and turned them once again towards Ömis.

Glancing at Verhär, Ömis continued: “We d’nay grasp the mekkins ‘hind it, but,” he coughed – “they said we thad dis substance been used a’power th’Engine.”

“Ow?”

“We just said ya we d’nay know.”

“And shon us just take yon folk by thon say?”

“Vell,” Ömis glanced once more at Verhär, “na sific reason can we see vhy’s sh’nay?”

“And wa sific reason de ya see vhy us *shon*?”

“Cause,” Ömis raised his palms level, “all us could die?”

Aphremn gave up searching for his matches, deciding that he must have forgotten them back home.

“Wa’ya mean?” asked Nethen.

“In thon missive,” replied Verhär slowly, “they spake it would cause a plosion the size cover’n the distance a’here a’t the eddy a’t the woodland.”

“Thad be,” said Nethen, trailing off, his eyes darting back and forth between the two of them.

“By radii alone they spake,” added Ömis, nodding.

“Who say’t th ya dis?” asked Nethen. “Who *zactly*?”

“Master Amananda,” said Ömis, studying Nethen’s gaze, “the lead sciencer. Ya met him!”

Nethen stared his colleague up and down. “Ow ya know it been *truly* him thad scribbled the missive?”

Ömis shook his head, exasperated. “We d’nay know.”

“Thad would kill allaone in Jremmin!”

“Yea.”

“Vhy’d the Levi’ve left us here with sumn like thad?”

“A’power th’Engine,” Verhär said with a long shrug.

“So th’Engine be gon a’plode? Be thad wa they spaken?”

“They spake they cannay spaken fer certain,” said Ömis.

“*Thad*, or’d they just nay *say’s*?”

“We d’nay know, me brüth.”

Nethen raised his hands to the top of his head, turned, and stepped away. “They must be lyin.”

“Bout wa?”

“Allathing.”

“Vhy?” asked Verhär.

“Get us a’rely on dem – turn us fraid.”

“Oh.”

“We’ll frain av claimin thad be nay possible,” said Ömis, “b’us must figure out a vay a’sudyin dis ourselves.”

“Vhy?”

“So’s can *know* fer ourselves.”

“Us *already* know.” Nethen lowered his hands. “They be *liars*.”

“Ow ya figure?”

“Vhy’d they say’s bout it?”

““Vhy?””

“Wa’d they’ve a’gain in sayin us all a’dis?”

The sun’s dull zenith peeked out from atop of the clouds on the horizon. Aphremn saw, on the bright turquoise-green water, the amphibian fishermen who had been out on their rafts since the middle of the previous night.

Verhär replied: “Good faith?”

Sweeping the air with a dismissive hand, Nethen responded: “Neither a’ya know anything!”

Ömis, eyes widening, huffed and bellowed: “Oh! Be *dis* winnin ya *milostivo* then?! Be *dis* dem *plain words* ya said us bout?!” Like a wobbling top, he limped after Nethen, pointing upwards at the back of his head. “*Y’ungol!* Ya know w’Anadon’s putation be! We know ya know wa we’m speakin!”

Nethen turned and looked over the top of Ömis’ smooth, flat, rubbery head. “*Verhär!*” he said. “Can ya say we vhy our folk in Isthis would *approve* the bassador’s journ if been there such scope a’danger thereby?!”

“We d’nay feel Ömis’ gestion be in poor faith, me brüth.”

“Thad be nay wa we-” The interrupting tip of Ömis’ blue-skinned, slippery finger pressed up against Nethen’s nose.

“Th’Engine be *jigger’d*,” Ömis shouted, “a’duce *vapor* thad lift the *compounds* inna *th’ozone!*” He advanced on Nethen. “In order ah *duce* so much *vay-por*, it *qui-er-eth en-er-gy!*”

Nethen had to hang onto a nearby post to stop himself from falling backwards into the water.

“Nepastra be *thad energy!* It made our *whole aerosphere!* Gave us *life!* And now y’are seekin a’get we – a’get *us!* – a’just *sume* it canna *take it avay’s vell?!*”

“Thad be nay wa we’m tryin a’claim, me brüth!”

“Na! Ya just vish us a’gnore it! A’wait and see if the *rains* wash it avay?! Vell, it be in yer *bones*, Nethen! And dem’ll nay be wash’d avay *soon enough!*”

“Ömis,” came a calm and pleasant voice.

Ömis turned his head and saw Aphremn standing beside him, grinning with an unlit cigarette held between his teeth.

“Light?” he said.

Drying up underneath the combination of allergies and stress, it took Ömis a moment to smile. “Course, Aphremn,” he said, waddling back from the edge and beginning to fumble through the pockets of his bright-orange, fur-lined, uncured-leather jacket.

Removing the cigarette from his mouth, and as Nethen pulled his own skinny form partway up by the post, Aphremn cleared his throat and spoke thus: “Shon us doubt dis missive? Seen it, have we. Scribbled by long-hand and in, we compy, miliar lingua. The paper been a stationary. The margins had names, and long quences a’numbs. If be it forgery, then us at ease, regardin th’Engine and all its constitution, may rest. But be it thentic, shon nay us know? – Clear and deffin lines ah enquiry vith dillige must us keep, fer n’ulter vay be there fer us a’function thereby.” He returned the cigarette to his lips and bent down to where Ömis held up a lit match.

“Haps learn a’read, ya two shon,” said Nethen, steadying himself with both hands fixed atop the top of the post, pressing into it with his narrow waist and scuffing the hems of his black silk

waistcoat and undertunic of yellowed linen. “Ömis and we the only literates mung us, so course ye find us at knife’s eddy – rinial antagna and so and so. But vhy be it always down ah *me* a’scond-spouse *hez acumen*?”

“Cause us tend the meetins, Brüzzen,” said Aphremn, straightening up and inhaling smoke of ignited vespry moss harvested from a mountainside deep into his lungs.

“We *work* all day,” said Nethen.

“Meetins *be* work,” said Aphremn.

Nethen, his eyes dark and small, stared at Aphremn for a moment longer before running a hand through his full head of greasy, unkempt hair. “We’d nay scrounge enough bits a’sleep yester. – Far too buried in tyin gether loose ends fer nowaday – too much logistisizin stumpeth the temper and so forth.” He looked at Ömis. “We’m *polly*, me brüzzen, if me words *fended* ya so. Been *nay* me tention. Sincere.”

Shaking the match dead, Ömis’ quadruple-lidded eyes refrained from meeting Nethen’s. “We...” His outermost gums curled up in discomfort as he looked down. “We de nay like ya.” He returned his matchbook to his pocket. “We actually quite *spise* ya,” he looked up and away – “quite a bit.”

Nethen smiled and nodded. “We compy.”

“A duel, shon us set tween ya two?” Aphremn asked.

“Na,” they both replied.

“Then, is settled. A’speak a’dis matter with greater seriousness promptest morrow, let us resolve.” He looked approvingly upon his lit cigarette as he rolled it gently back and forth between his thumb and two main fingers. “Yea?”

They all three replied: “Yea.”

“Tremendo.”

There was then, at last, enough space and quiet that Aphremn could feel himself fully able to breathe.

Nethen searched his pockets for a kerchief with which he sought to wipe his spectacles of spittle as the other two awkwardly parted and recommenced their loitering.

Ömis looked upon the village back on land. He saw the people, little more than specks, sticking their heads out of their windows and passing in and out of sight between the corners of their homes. Camel-drawn carriages carrying loads of straw and other harvested goods formed a line from the azure fields northeast of town. They looked like ants spaced out and crawling across the distant sloping blue hills of grass towards the buildings where festivities for that year's Salvusday were being prepared.

Verhär, meanwhile, looked upon the Engine which loomed over the northern horizon beyond the village. The whole of it was steeped by distance within a peach-colored, vanilla haze the same hue as that which tinted Jremmin's primarily pale magenta skies. It resembled a tarnished pearl of grayish-white that stood taller than the hills and sat cushioned within the center and atop the ersatz "lotus petals" of its base structure. Verhär had always felt that this base structure, comprised of what were actually called 'pavilion cells,' more greatly resembled a tightly-stacked assortment of polished stones (a slightly darker shade than the sphere itself) than they did any kind of lotus petals that he had ever seen. But they were referred to as 'lotus petals' all the same, such nomenclature having taken root long before his time. He always figured it was simply more conducive to songwriting and other such forms of expression to call them something pretty. And, after all, it *was* pretty.

The Engine was a very pretty and somewhat frightening thing. It was the one part of what the Septumvirate left behind which never quite managed to blend in with the environment, nor to even remotely seem like it belonged in the valley. It had always been there, or at least for as long as the village itself had been there. The reality of *why* it was there, however, and what it was *for*, always made it somehow seem like an enemy – like some kind of alien ship

forever parked amid the sloping hills and ranks of mighty conifers dwarfed by its shadow. Season after season, and year after year, it reminded the villagers of those things which they, often and more than anything else, wished to forget.

And now, based upon the somewhat-possibly-dubious missive sent from Isthis, they knew that there was a non-zero-percent likelihood that it could perhaps, someday, just randomly explode.

Verhär looked away, casting his eyes downward into the water. "Ow longer must us wait here?" he asked.

"Til he riveth," Ömis replied, spritzing his face with his moisturizing spray bottle.

"Vhy be he runnin so late then?" Verhär turned around and looked at the sun which had, by then, cleared the eastern horizon. "Hez missive spake he'd be rivin fore *dawn*, na?"

"Haps he meant by Anadon's rotation."

"Vhy expect us a'know th'time by anulter sphere's sunrise?"

"Y'know ow they be," said Nethen, fixing one of his lenses back into the frame.

"We de?"

"Septarians *always* de's they vish. Been true back in the Fore's one can only sume it be now."

Ömis huffed with a venomous chuckle: "Would've been poor phrasin then. One sh'nay spaken '*dusk*' nor '*dawn*' 'cept in 'cord vith th'rotation a'the *harkener's sphere*."

"Who be us a'say," Nethen shrugged. "Haps *us* be the ones bein rude fer sumin as much." He wiped his cheek, leaving a stain of powdered chalk beside his mustache. "Standards shift, allafter."

Leaning against a barrel in which bait was kept, Aphremn exhaled moss smoke from his mouth and into his nostrils.

After finishing his cigarette, he soon departed, having better things to do with his time.

2

It was like a giant with bones that were cold and slippery when the water of the darkness was on them.

All gathered in its stomach whenever the sky opened up and let the brightness in, and it was in this brightness that the monsters could hide.

The bones grew hotter in the light than the hard, round dirt, which could not be dug through and which rested near the fast-moving water, ever did.

The giants of the field were slow and had to be avoided until they stopped moving and the bones came out. The more they did not move, the more bones there were until they were all and only bones which would often then disappear.

They hid in the stomach of one that never disappeared, but which was all bone. It was bigger than the other giants, and smelled different.

The young returned later than the old.

A distant, lilting holler echoed, deep to their ears, and then another from a different direction as they returned, one-by-one, in desperate leaps.

A flurry came from above that sent dark bone around one, and they were taken.

Though fear and sorrow sweltered among their kin, and though such pain always seeped into their blood and was thenceforth branded onto their veins, their minds could never help but soon forget.

...

“He got one,” said Amy, hands behind her back and feet apart and planted atop the cobblestone wall.

Skinny and small from a life of regular fasting, her dusky skin was paler than it had been in previous years. She had short, dark-purplish-brown dreads and wore a scarf around her neck atop a loose-fitted blue poet blouse with cold shoulders and patterned cut-outs like paper snowflakes running down its long sleeves. Bundled around her waist was a band of the same kind of fabric tied at the back and holding up a long, heavy brown dress draped around her legs to the knobby bulbs of her inward-bent knees.

Beside her, Rosemary, who was even paler, gave a long shrill whistle which pierced the morning yodel echoes of the village children who lived at the southern tip of the eastern mountain range. Her hair was short, unkempt, partly straight, and bleached silvery white. She was wearing the same grey dress that all sisters at the temple had to wear.

They were both, at all times and in accordance with the customs of their faith, barefoot and blindfolded.

Rosemary raised her right hand out to the side, clad in a heavy leather gauntlet, and held up a treat with her left. Somersault spiraled in descent around them before landing upon the glove. Tucking the treat into the nape of her thumb, Rosemary presented an open hand.

‘Give,’ she said in Bird.

Somersault tilted his body and put a talon forward.

Amy saw a tuft of blue fur between Rosemary's fingers.

‘Good,’ Rosemary said before producing the treat which Somersault removed with one of his prehensile tongues. “Hold this,” she said to Amy.

Amy held out both hands cupped together and Rosemary placed the specimen into her palms. She pressed her thumb quickly but gently against the back of its head and made her observations while Rosemary fitted Somersault's hood back on over his eyes.

"Its pigments are faded," said Amy.

"Go on," said Rosemary without looking.

"I think they're malnourished from the drought."

Clipping the last button on Somersault's hood, Rosemary seemed to briefly glance. "Are you sure about that?"

Amy paused to think. She looked back down at the blue rodent lying in her palm. "It seems the most likely cause."

"Try to think of another."

It scratched helplessly at the base of her index finger.

"A change in diet, maybe? Not malnutrition, but a disruption in the enzyme profile?"

"Tell me what it's called."

"The species?"

"Yes."

Its ears were larger than its body. It had long back legs for advanced locomotion, big eyes suggestive of nocturnality, and stripes of tiny golden-yellow spots along its sides.

"Speckled ossiegold?"

"Good. Now, why does it have yellow specks on its sides?"

"To blend in with the sunseed wheat?"

"Which means?"

"It's from up north."

"What is my next question?"

"Why are they moving south?"

"And what is your answer?"

"Less food up north this year."

"What do they eat?"

"Mostly bugs – grass for fiber."

"Are they male or female?"

"Uh, male."

"Have you ever seen one before?"

"No, Sister. Only in the books."

Rosemary finished tying Somersault's leg to his perch atop their cart before turning to face her pupil. "What makes you think it's male?"

"It doesn't have a pouch."

"What if I told you the males were the ones who had pouches?"

With her inner eye, Amy looked at the silken pattern of Rosemary's blindfold. "Is that a trick question?" she asked.

They studied each other until Rosemary's jaw softened and its sides receded back into the rectangle of her face. "Yes," she said, uncrossing her arms. "Container four, please."

Heart rate slowing, Amy whispered broken Rodent to the creature in her hand as she jostled through the jars in her belt.

Rosemary bent over to pick up the handle of their cart and glanced once more: "How did you know the fur's color was faded if you've never seen one in person before?"

"I don't know," Amy bragged as she popped the cork-cap from the mouth of the fourth little jar in her belt. "I just could."

They were making their way down the draw towards the rusted tractor which, overgrown with moss and ivy, rested at the nadir below.

Somersault had abducted the ossiegold from out of a patch of grass only a couple paces away from the long-decommissioned machine. The pair's next step was to check the area for any signs of a possible nest.

Balancing on the cobblestone wall, Amy focused on each step she took. Behind her and to her right rattled the cart that carried their field instruments as Rosemary, ahead of her, pulled it along.

On the other side of the wall, a group of tapir-like buku remained undistracted from their grazing as the noisy cart passed.

Amy stopped and looked at her own narrow shadow stretching across the grayish spots of fur covering their wide, flat hides.

“Amy,” Rosemary chided.

She looked up and saw that Rosemary had not slowed down and that the back of their cart was now in front of her, rocking side-to-side.

“You’re dawdling,” she said. “Come along.”

Amy felt a cool breeze from the northeast caress the sides of her neck and chin and, in idle disregard of Rosemary’s request, shut her eyes, dimmed her vision, and listened to the creaking of the wooden axels, snapping of crisp earth, and the rattling of empty jars.

The largest of the buku raised its head and bellowed, taking her by surprise and causing her to fall as she issued forth an exclamation of fear: “Ah!”

“Amy!” Rosemary cried out, turning as the frame of the cart’s heavy carriage collided against her shins and wincing as Somersault’s wings flapped blindly from his perch above. The cart almost fell over to one side, but she was able to prevent it from doing so by holding onto the tied-together stack of field equipment with both of her arms and forcing it to remain in some kind of state resembling stability.

Still wrangling their belongings back into place, Rosemary looked up and saw, several yards behind her, Amy lying face-down in the dirt with one leg bent up.

Catching her breath, she clutched her chest and laughed: “Don’t tell me you *insulted* them!”

Uncoiling her limbs, Amy lifted her freshly-scuffed face from the earth and pushed herself part-way up. “I didn’t even say anything!”

Holding onto the cart, Rosemary had to stifle her laughter.

“What’s so funny?” asked Amy as bits of dirt and grass fell from her cheek.

Rosemary shook her head, glanced back, and smiled. "If only you could see-" Trailing off, straightening her posture with an inhale and letting go of the cargo upon ensuring that it was steady pressed out the wrinkles from the front of her blouse and skirt with her pale-pink wrists and fingers. "*Hooh!* Well," she bent over and picked up the cart-handle from where she had let it fall, "let us not slow down." Pulling herself up, she dispensed with one last faint impression of a chuckle as her legs pivoted to resume their down-hill trek in the other direction. "Please do walk beside me."

Amy smiled and pushed herself all the way up to her feet and dashed past the cart to Rosemary's side.

"I think they're *tricksters*," she whispered, looking up at her mentor.

"Who?" asked Rosemary.

"The buku. All they ever do is eat, and all they ever say is false. Even Sister Samsa says so. The other day, I asked one what the color of the sky was, and do you know what they said?"

"What?"

"They said it was *blue*."

"They see things differently than we do."

"But they're *always* saying things that aren't true."

"Perhaps they have poor hearing."

"They *pretend* to not hear."

Rosemary turned her head towards Thel in the distant fog and sighed: "They aren't liars if that's what you're implying."

"Of course not," Amy replied, lowering her head.

The entire valley on the edge of which Thel was situated acted as a promontory that cut the wind like a ship's prow. Stray currents of blistering air leaked in from all sides during the cold season. Even during Summer, gales whipped like speared eels across the slopes such as the one which they were now descending.

Amy was reminded of how she felt when Felicity showed her the wind-scarf she had crocheted for her that previous solstice.

She had thanked Felicity and hugged her. She felt the soft patterned knots squishing against the inside of her fingers and thumbs.

The wind was not strong that morning, but its appearance was often sudden.

“Does that sound sharp to you?” asked Rosemary, halting again, slowly this time.

Amy, who had not noticed the rising scales of the morning carillon being played from Thel’s belltower in the distance, stopped as well and listened. “I’m not sure,” she said.

“Listen.”

To Amy, the ringing of the bells seemed to sound the same as they had every other morning.

Rosemary grumbled: “The high third sounds like it’s out of tune,”

Amy tried to force her ears to hear it. “Can bells go out of tune?” she asked.

“Of course they can,” said Rosemary as she let the cart-handle fall once more and took a step forward. “They change shape.”

The vibrations of tone bent and swayed as they echoed through the valley.

“How do we-”

“*Shh!*”

After being shushed, Amy heard a screech and looked across the pasture. She saw two children playing, a boy and a girl, running along the other side of a wooden fence. The boy was chasing the girl, neither’s gait having fully dispensed with the unsteadiness of toddlerhood.

Rosemary cupped her hand around her ear; Amy heard the tinkering of little claws against glass beside her waist.

The children crossed over the crest of the hill, departing towards their parent’s cottage from which plumed the gray-green smoke of an indoor fire of pinewood and wild flowers that exhumed a perfume-like aroma whenever burnt.

The homes of many villagers were beginning to usher forth such plumes.

“Remind me,” said Rosemary, once again compulsively pressing the wrinkles from her dress, “to inform Sister Dither that an inspection is in order.”

Amy’s attention returned to Rosemary. “An inspecsh-” she stammered. “Do you mean the bells, Sister?”

“Yes, that is what I mean.” Rosemary once again bent over and picked up the cart handle. “Make sure you tell me when we get back home.”

Amy knew Rosemary needed no reminding of anything. But she also knew that, if she failed to do as she was instructed, a note would be made which would thenceforth inform the other sisters’ treatment of her in future lessons.

Thus, Rosemary continued down the hill, towards the rusted tractor, and Amy followed, watching the back of their cart as it bounced from side-to-side over each and every precious root and stone.

3

“*Halt!*” shouted the short and slender Sapien director in his ragged suit as he shot up from his chair and walked towards the stage. “Vhy’re ya *pausin* so much?”

“A’make it more rousin,” said the Simian narrator, bright ribbons in her long muttonchops and flowers in her hair.

“Is rousin *already*. All y’are doin by *pausin* so much be *wastin time*.” He felt his headache from earlier that morning return. “Again?” he said with a twist of his neck.

She huffed and tilted her head, letting a few flowers fall to the stage.

“And stop movin yer head like thad!” he snapped on his way back to his chair. “Already said ya we thad us be runnin low on dem flowers!”

She looked around at the stage hands moving the scenery about around her and sighed.

“*Again!*” directed the director.

“Ya smell diffen,” Vismund whispered as Yasri broke his grip from around the flask.

“Diffen?” she asked, face oblique to his. “Ow?”

“Like a *bonfire*,” he said.

She raised the flask to drink of it, but was intercepted by him pressing his mouth against hers and rubbing the cheap metal of his costume against her forearm. She broke his grip and pulled away and looked at her sleeve. “Look wa ya-”

It was hardly scuffed.

She looked up, smiling. “Ya *ruin’d* it!”

“Ya can *barely* see it.”

She tugged the linen folds straight to see more clearly while he got closer, and she pushed him away again.

“Wa be wrong?” he asked.

“They be gon a’wonder vhere we am.”

“Us been here since dawn. If they *need* ya, let dem *seek* ya.”

He took the flask back from her after she took a swig.

“Vhere been ya thad made ya smell like thad?”

“Like ya spake,” she said, “a *bonfire*.”

“Vhere?”

“We d’nay recall.”

“Who vith?”

Leaning forward, she pressed against his sternum with the tips of her fingers and sang: “*Allaone but ya*.”

“Hydraulics been chew’d thro by moosha,” the amphibian interpreter translated as the arachnid engineer chirped, “and there be na vay a’mendin it in time.”

Between the translator and the arachnid engineer, the director stood and looked upon the unraveling shamble of nails and painted wood splayed out before them across the dirt of the supply lot. It barely conveyed any longer, after several hours of attempted repair, the impression of a cosmic serpent as originally intended. Now, instead, it languished under mediocre sunlight like a used cart for sale, its unhinged jaw of mildewy and gnawed-upon plywood teeth neither smiling nor frowning and its painted eyes forever-wide in a manner as friendly as that of an eel peeking out from an undersea cave.

“So,” said the director, pressing against one of his temples, “be there *any* smoke comin out a’the mouth?”

Being an arachnid, the engineer was physically incapable of speaking Chordatian languages such as Low Isthisian, which is what the director was speaking (not to be confused with the similar and mutually-intelligible language known on Earth as ‘English’). He was, however, still capable of comprehending it, and thus answered forthrightly with another series of clicks in his own percussive and guttural tongue (one which the director had never bothered to develop an understanding of, hence the presence of an interpreter).

“Spaken na,” said the interpreter, “all comin out a’the neck and torso.”

The engineer lit a cigarette and inhaled its smoke through a gap in the exoskeleton of one of his sixteen wrists.

The director’s headache worsened.

Yasri sighed. “Sound fun, dath thad.” She stood from the barrel they had been sitting upon all morning and started cleaning her outfit. It had become pierced through by splinters, and there were some ants crawling around on it.

“They spaken there’ll be a bassador av one a’the Seven anight,” said Vismund, lying on his side atop the barrel.

She paused as an ant was caught between her fingers and looked back. “Bassador?”

“Yea, y’know,” he peeled the skin from an akdar fruit with his pocket-knife, “a real charisto.”

“We know w’a bassador be, Vismund.” She turned away. “We be nay thad dense.” She noticed the two stains left on the prints of her thumb and forefinger and began searching for something to wipe it onto.

“We spake ya know,” he said.

“Ya know which a’the Seven?” she asked.

“Anadon,” he replied.

She considered her socks, but realized that those had belonged to her grandmother. “Which be thad?”

“They make weapons fer Isthis.” He picked up his feet and rolled onto his back. “Na chance we’ll be here anight – na chance.”

“Y’only sign’d on a’get close a’me anyvays,” she grumbled.

“*Crazy*,” he said, discarding the last of the akdar skin.

She was just about to speak but, from the backstage interior, the knocking about of someone working their way towards the door which led into the alley arose.

Fear overcame her and she turned to face him and blurted out a single word: “*Hide?*”

Furrowing his brow, he smiled and asked: “Vhy?”

The door then opened and Kella peeked her head out from behind it. “Yasri!” she proclaimed. “Here y’are!”

“*Mornin, Kel,*” sang Vismund, pulling the now-peeled akdar into slices. “Be fair the parlor in its humors?”

Noticing Vismund, Kella stepped through the frame, cocked her head and swung her jaw to the side as the end of her long tail, bedecked in colorful ribbon, peeked out from over and behind her shoulder. “*Viz,*” she said, “me brüth be at the mornin drill, and certain’s silver ya shon be there as vell.”

“Nayth yond Yon-Most-High may sway me av me soul’s most-yearnin.”

“*Ahhhhhhh,*” she nodded and smiled, eyes widening, “hope thad worketh out fer ya.” Her eyes then dimmed as she turned her attention back towards Yasri. “Yaz, the bossman vishes a’try thad scene again.”

“Wa scene?” asked Yasri.

“Molly and Naughttheenavar. Back on, ten bits a’time.”

Kella then vanished back inside, shutting the door behind her, and her footsteps faded back into the general static of distant labor and muffled conversations.

Yasri looked back down at the stains on her forefinger and thumb and realized that she could just wipe them onto the barrel – or anywhere, really – and that it did not matter, nor did her guilt, nor the nausea, nor Vismund’s many promises.

“*Stupid*,” she murmured.

“Unastute, be we,” said Vismund before biting into an akdar slice, “or be Kella’s eyes gettin bluer vith age?”

Yasri felt her jaw clench.

Assistants of various disciplines were gathered around the director in a semicircle on-stage. They had been summoned as to be informed that the sunsplitter puppet (which was central to a very important scene) was no longer functioning at full capacity.

“Say thad *bug*,” the director muttered while biting his nails and staring at the planks upon which they all stood – “say him na smoke need a’be comin out a’the mouth.”

“We ded,” said the interpreter.

“Say him us d’nay’veen *need* smoke,” the director spat.

“We ded.”

“Vhere be he now?”

“We d’nay know.”

He snapped to attention and looked the interpreter in his bulbous, translucent eyes.

“But he just been here.”

The interpreter pursed his lipless mouth and shrugged.

The director’s face then grew flushed, and he tore away from the semicircle, pushing the others aside before jumping from the edge of the stage and lumbering up one of the aisles while cursing and rattling off epithets largely racial in nature.

...

They were back on opposite ends of the sideways barrel, facing each other.

“But *vhy* nay?” asked Vismund.

“Ya kiddin?” Yasri replied, tugging at her cretonne-laced chiffon blouse. “Ya figure we'm wearin dis just a'go fook round in the woods?”

“But the zoas be bringin in a *yonsider*. ”

“So?”

“Wa'f next year they bring *more*?”

As she heard this, her eyes faltered, and she shook her head. “They'd nay de thad.”

“They already be dein it. And if they de it *dis* year, they'll de it *next* year. And then the next, and then the next.”

Her eyes fell to the pale-yellow blotch of sunlight invading the dull silver of his armor chest plate lying unworn between them.

“Only proper response,” he continued, “be refusal a'comply.”

Her big, green eyes met his, and his were bright and chestnut colored. “Who said ya there'd be a bassador?” she asked.

“Bo,” he said, leaning back. “Bo sayeth we the zoas kiss'd dirt soon's the Seven press'd, and he spake thad he figureth Nethen be lookin fer some kin a'deal.”

“Wa kin a'deal?”

Vismund laughed. “Who dath know,” he said, sitting up while tearing the last slice from the akdar peel. “Wa'ver he can get, we spose.” He held it beneath her nostrils, squeezing lightly, and whispered: “Allaone and allathing us know be gettin hawk'd per the sinker.”

She smiled. “Then vhy're ya grinnin?”

His grin widened. “Cause we'm vith *ya*. ”

He pressed the akdar against her lips. Her eyes crossed themselves to focus upon details of his knuckles, and then uncrossed

as she once again met his gaze. She let it pass, and tasted the membrane of organic film that she did not care to know the proper name of, and then bit down.

Acidic droplets landed on Vismund's upper cheek, just below his eye, and he winced and fell part-way back.

"Spakenin we be buku fer the meathouse," she laughed over the pulp, "be nay a pedient path a'me heart, Viz"

As she slurped the rest of the akdar down, Vismund carefully wiped his bottom lid dry and grimly cursed: "*Izda.*"

On the other side of the playhouse, the director was pacing circles in the middle of the street.

"*Hath anyone seen me duction sistant?!* " he cried while beating his fist through the air. "*A bug, be he! A bug, we spake!*"

Though most who were in the street passed him by, having grown tired of such prejudicial outbursts in recent years, a small number of onlookers had gathered around to heckle.

"*He be one a'dem giant bugs ya see walkin round!*" an adolescent jeered with a sardonic jangling of their limbs.

"*Yea!*" a cohort of theirs added. "*Keepin thon tabs on the chordates?!*"

"*Ow dare they!*"

As they laughed at his expense, the director gritted his teeth, blushed, and twisted his head around, still searching in earnest for his missing engineer.

Yasri squealed. "*Desist!*" she barked, unable to stop herself from laughing.

“Na!” he replied. Lying on the ground with his arms wrapped around one of her shins, Vismund absorbed many unrestrained kicks from her other boot directed at his head and shoulders.

She tried driving his face into the gravel, but he took a hold of that leg instead and dragged his tongue across her ankle, and she flung her arms back to get away, screaming: “*Fook!*”

He rose and pressed his shoulders against her thighs and they both plummeted to the ground, sending up bits of limestone and dust.

“Y’ight?” he asked.

“*Na, we’m nay fookin ight!*” She punched his shoulders and the back of his head. “*Off!*”

He rose to his knees and shuffled back, laughing. “Polly,” he said, casting his shadow over her. “D’nay mean a’fell ya.” He brushed his long, dark-brown hair from his face, his lopsided smile revealing one of his sharper-than-normal canines. “F’real, y’nay kay?”

Air filled her lungs which she forced herself to expel. “Vhy’d ya call me a izda, Vismund?” she asked.

“Cause if ya place y’energies inna dis duction and thad yonsider be in the seats a’speck it,” he pointed nowhere, smacking his lips, “then y’are helpin a’send a missive a’him and allabody *like him* thad Jremmin be open fer thon kin, and *more* folk be gon a’come here, and they be gon a’take allathing us have and leave us nada fer our kinlin.”

“Kinlin?” said Yasri.

“D’nay ya vish fer kinlin?” asked Vismund.

“Yea, course, but-”

“D’nay ya vish fer dem a’frolick freely as us ded?”

“Wa’t thad a’do vith me playin Molly?”

Like lightning, he fell over her, and his hands pressed down against the gravel to both sides of her head, and his narrow chest sunk into her cleavage.

“Y’are much prettier’n Kel,” he said. “One a’tthese days we’m gon a’take y’a’the stars, and us’ll make *omni* kinlin, and have *omni* ventures – so many, charistas vill scribble bout us fer numbless evers.”

She grabbed his hands and pushed them away. “Wa maketh ya figure ya know thad?”

He smiled, and laughed, as she lifted him by his wrists with ease. “We know,” he said.

She rocked to one side and pushed him away before scooting back and dusting herself off. “Vell,” though her legs were unsteady, she forced herself to stand, “if wa y’are sayin be true-”

“Then y’are a izda,” he said with a shrug.

She swung her leg back and kicked it forward, trying to send up as much gravel at him as she could. “*Cease thad!*” she cried.

He leaned back to avoid getting dust in his eyes and went on: “We’m nay gon a’lie a’ya, Yaz. Y’are lettin *wickedness* in.” He raised his arms, gesturing at their surroundings. “Us live in a *yulah* perched at the eddy a’Din itself, and y’are playin a’let thad noise swallow us up? Ya figure things be better yonside than they been in the Fore? Na. Thon cyborgs be *cyborgier*. Thon horrors be *horrorer*. Ya shon ask Bo bout it. He dath know.”

“If Jremmin be such a *yulah*,” she said, “vhy’re y’always yappin bout leavin?”

“Spoken bout goin out in it, hath we.” He withdrew his arms back in on himself. “Y’are talkin bout lettin it in – two *very* differrn things, Yasri.”

“Thad be nay...”

She stopped and looked at him.

He had always been small, but sitting on the ground in his false suit of armor, somehow, he seemed smaller than ever before.

“Larson’ll thrash y’again, Vismund,” she mewled.

“Only if he findeth out,” he replied, resting his arms upon one knee.

There was no point.

She recalled how he used to get upset, and how sensitive he once was. Nothing seemed to faze him now. Since his return from Mervéda, it was as though some part of him had finally snapped, and that he was left forever unhinged. Mervéda was a strange place filled with strange people, after all, and it had many rumors swirling around its name. He had departed across the channel, and to its shores shortly after losing his one remaining parent. He was like a ghost back then, wandering through peoples’ yards at night and never sleeping in the same spot two nights in a row. He was also getting into more fights than usual around that time as well.

small

She once saw Larson swing him by the legs into the corner of the eastern chapel. Though she fancied Larson, she did not think it was nice how he did that, or how he did that sort of thing in general. Some of the adults tried to help Vismund in his general situation, but a few among them only made things worse. She recalled some awful woman her mother had used to invite over to do stitchwork in their kitchen who knew Vismund in passing only, and how she had openly fantasized about drowning him for some reason, and how she said that he was nothing more than a nuisance and a ‘scourge.’ Yasri did not even recall what the woman’s grievances were, nor what her name was, but she begged her parents to disbar this individual from their home, which they obliged.

awful

He went to Mervéda of his own accord soon after all of that and spent more than a few months down there. After he returned, he started paying more attention to her. She found a pair of earrings made of feathers resting upon the outside of her bedroom windowsill one morning. She did not discover that he had gotten back one day

before until later that day. He never took credit for them, but he was always making this-and-that, and she knew it had to be him who had left them there.

masks

He was restless, and things which were fixed in others were like water in him – a fact which he did not ever seem to realize about himself. Everyone always told her that he was crazy, and she used to believe that they were simply jealous, and she wondered how could they not see in him what she saw: his unrelenting selflessness, vitality and passion. But now, with each and every season that came and went, she suspected more and more that she was mistaken and that, though he had good qualities, and though she knew she was not *entirely* wrong in believing that there was something special about him, it was all part of some kind of mask that he wore. At least, that was what he himself claimed. He had once told her, in the middle of the night, that all of existence was a mask. He had said to her, whispering in her ear, that he himself was a mask, and that she was a mask, and that her siblings and cousins and father and mother and grandfathers and grandmothers and aunts and uncles were all masks.

all

She never really understood what he meant by that, and used to think masks were for fun. But that night, even though she was able to tell by the sound of his voice that he was smiling when he said all this to her, she sensed also that he did not mean it in any way which she herself could ever construe as fun or even necessarily tolerable. Perhaps such notions were somehow calming to him but, to her, they seemed altogether dreadful and unnecessary.

“And if he dath,” Vismund continued, “then so shall it be.”

She felt tears welling up against the backs her eyes and had to look away. “Vismund,” she said, moving towards the exit, her voice trembling, “is clear y’are nay meant a’stay, so...”

She opened the door and rested a hand upon its frame.

“ – Ya cause me so much pain.” She was whimpering as she stepped inside, refusing to look at him. “So please leave.”

Inside, it was cool and dark, and she shut the door and tried to run as fast as she could to hide the sound of her oncoming sobs.

He liked Yasri's breasts. They were very large. He liked her eyes as well. They were also very large, and bright green too. They even matched her hair, and he liked that as well.

He rushed out of the alleyway behind the playhouse and onto the street, tearing off his fake pauldrons and greaves and letting them fall wherever they may.

He choked down the sun and saw that there was still time to get to where his actual guard's uniform was. Once there, he would put it on and depart for Hunter's Pass where Zoa Aphremn's morning drills were being conducted. He would then be able to attend the very last portion, though he knew that he would be reprimanded for being late, as was so often the case. Although he somewhat disliked being reprimanded, it seemed to him that Aphremn spoke his wisest sayings then, so him being late really was not that big of a deal, and in fact was actually somewhat of a good thing. All the same, he sprinted as fast as he could, if just because he enjoyed the feeling of going very fast.

Thus, running past a row of camels tied to a hitching post and starting to pant, he turned onto Kes Hill Boulevard from which the entirety of Waterfront could be seen below.

4

“I love you, Amyyy.”

At her desk, Rosemary looked over a report sent by Zoa Ömis the previous day.

“Say: I love youuuu.”

It described the extent to which the average weight of all fish caught in the channel that year had increased from that of the year prior, as was recorded every year since the Engine raised the planet’s oxygen levels.

“I luhhhv youuuuuu, Amyyyyy.”

Though this measure had once served a purpose, it had, gradually over time and since before Rosemary’s birth, become little more than a formality.

“Somersault – say: ‘I-’”

“Amy, can you please be quiet.”

Thel’s walls were all stone. Some were stacked; others, carved. Rosemary’s study was half-and-half. A divide ran down the wall behind her desk. On the side which had been carved into the mountain itself the wall-texture was smooth save for a few grains and worn ridges like those chipped from the sides of a sandcastle or an arrowhead.

In the far corner which extended beyond the mountainside and near the window overlooking the chasm sat Amy in a green armchair. That was on the side of the room where the walls were made of granite blocks carved and stacked in accordance with meticulous planning.

Perched on a winding stand of marbled whitewood before her was Somersault, pruning his teal feathers with three of his five sinuous tongues.

“I’m trying to get him to say-”

“That he ‘loves you.’ I know.”

Somersault bristled. Amy looked up at him.

“I got him to say it before,” she said.

Rosemary said nothing.

Drawing her legs up, Amy pushed her knees into the seat, turned to look over the back of the chair, and asked: “Is that this year’s fish report?”

“It is,” Rosemary replied without looking up.

“And?”

Rosemary turned a page. “Same as ever.”

“That’s good.”

“Is it?”

“Yuh-huh.” Amy crossed her arms under her chin. “Bigger fish mean bigger feasts?”

Turning another page, Rosemary sighed: “I suppose so.”

“Is the rate of change continuing to level out?”

“It is.” She stacked and ordered the pages of the report together and filed them alongside many other such documents. “If things keep going this way, it would not be surprising if short-term mutations cease within the next five years.” She produced a quill from her inkwell and pulled a standardized sheet of parchment towards her from across the surface of her wooden desk.

Amy cleared her throat and asked: “Rosemary?”

“Mh,” Rosemary replied.

“Can I ask a question?”

“What is it?”

“Why do mutations happen?”

Rosemary, with quill in-hand, froze.

“I mean, I know what they *are* and how they *work* and all the stuff you’ve taught me, but-”

“But why do they happen,” Rosemary interrupted, sliding the parchment back aside.

The tips of Amy's fingers dug into the cushion.

"Is that what you're asking me?"

Amy inhaled and replied: "Yes."

Placing her quill back in its inkwell and leaning forward, Rosemary clasped her hands together, looked at Amy, and smiled. "Why don't you tell me?"

Amy looked down. "Well," she said, the nail of her forefinger scraping the back of her other hand, "the classwork text says that mutation is the result of errors in the replication of DNA."

"Mhm."

"But I don't think that's satisfactory."

"No?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because why should we call it 'error'?"

Rosemary raised her hands, fingers interwoven, and rested her chin upon her knuckles. "Why not?"

"Well," said Amy as dry air blew in from the window, "because calling it 'error' implies a predetermined function."

"Go on."

"Well, as defined in the books, mutation seems to exist on a biophysiological subscale which extends far beneath the purview of any function."

"Mm."

"And like you say, there's more complexity in one worm than in a thousand stars, and I'm just not sure how one can assume a system so complex would not account for--"

"Nature is *not* an accountant, Amy," Rosemary interrupted once again.

"Of course not," Amy replied.

"You must remember that numbers are not real."

"I know."

"Then what are you saying?"

Amy looked up at the ceiling and saw that it was bare. “Error,” she said – “or, rather, the *assignment* of error to the causative role in regards to changes in the biosphere,” she nodded as she spoke, “reduces the foundation of being so that being itself becomes subject to that which is merely the product of itself.”

“What do you mean,” said Rosemary, “when you refer to ‘the foundation of being?’”

“Nature.”

“Do you believe that to be a proper definition of Nature?”

Amy felt her throat tighten. “For the purposes of this conversation?”

“And when you say ‘that which is the product of itself,’” Rosemary shifted in her seat and looked away, but only briefly, “what do you mean?”

“Reason.”

“Do you believe that Reason is a product of mutation?”

Amy did not respond.

“Are you suggesting that genes cannot be subject to Error as a result of Error itself being a construct of Reason, and Reason itself being a construct of genes?”

“That is not what I am saying,” Amy said, shaking her head “because we ascribe to genes the function of ensuring the survival of the organism of which they are a part.”

“And what about *before* we ascribe them this function?”

Amy stared at the green felt between her fingers, and felt it with her fingers, and felt her fingers. “That’s why I’m asking you this question,” she said. “I don’t know.” Amy, then, did not say anything, and she did not move, and she felt time pass, and wondered if maybe that was what Rosemary wanted.

Rosemary, also silent, tapped her forefinger against the back of her other hand and observed Amy. “Why does mutation happen?” she repeated. Her finger tapped the back of her hand once more, loudly. “Good question.” She sat up and pushed herself away from

her desk. "Very good," she murmured, shuffling papers together under her arm. "Would you please put Somersault back in the cage and change their feed?" She stood. "I'll be right back."

Amy watched Rosemary drift towards the passageway which led into her quarters before exiting through it. She then turned her attention to the large cage of interwoven wire wrapped around wooden posts that occupied the opposite corner of the room. In it, Somersault's mate, Twilight, was perched.

good question

Twilight had stopped eating a few days prior. Something was wrong with her, though it was discouraged in Thel to say that there was anything 'wrong' with illness. Upon inspection, Sister Mendel said that Twilight's condition would improve, and that she would soon become 'good as new,' so it seemed rather silly to Amy that she should still worry. But all the same, it brought her great sadness to see Twilight leaning to one side with her face so pallid and feathers thinning.

Her calves pulsed with soreness from that morning's walk as she stood. She slipped on the leather gauntlet, pulled the laces without tying them, held up her arm, and whistled for Somersault to step onto her wrist.

The corner of the room in which their cage was situated was dimmer than the space by the window.

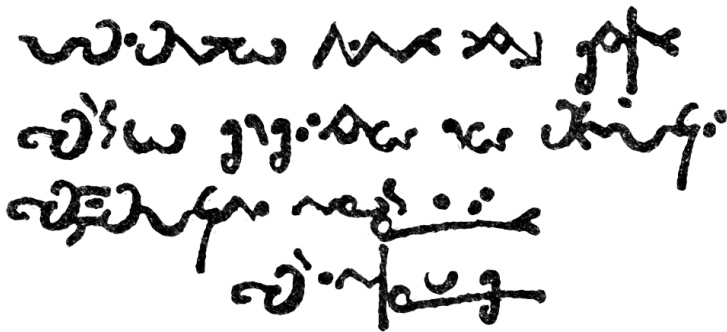
Amy, with her free hand, and whilst holding up Somersault's weight with the other, undid the latch, stepped inside, and raised him to his spot on the perch beside Twilight. He stepped onto it and began nuzzling her. They shut their thick-lidded eyes and purred.

Twilight seemed healthier to Amy than she had the day before, which was good. But she still seemed tired, and merely bobbed her head up and down in approval of Somersault's presence.

It then occurred to Amy (not for the first time that morning) that it was Salvusday. Thus, it being improper to indulge in

melancholy on such a holiday, she bit the inside of her cheek and refocused on her task.

Yellow straw clung to the floor and spilt out through the wires, and there were paper newsletters under the straw. She caught a glance of the headline on the front page of one:



It was in High Isthisian and (translated into her peoples' own unique dialect of Low Isthisian) said something like: "*Marauding Greys, In Bid To Hamper Relief, Seize Cargo On Track For Delivery, Says Senior Magi-Supreme*"

She did not know what a 'Senior Magi-Supreme' was, and, though she had heard of Greys and of the evils they were wont to commit, the ultimate meaning behind the headline was unclear to her, as was the case with a great majority of them.

Jremmin had, for a few years now, been inundated with newsletters, pamphlets and tracts launched via zirconium capsules from many star-systems away which burst like fireworks in the sky upon their descent. The documents they carried often were about peace in the galaxy and progress and good will and so forth. Some of it was about events involving people who had names which were, to her, never recognizable and who were always spoken of in either strong-and-hostile or glowing-and-reverent terms.

The sisters taught them that this style of writing was called ‘propaganda.’

Her eyes, searching, glossed over some of the other headlines. She had previously read them all, though she had rarely taken the time to glance at the texts of any of the articles themselves.

She found the slumped-over burlap sack leaning against the inside of the cage and, taking the wooden scooper, drove it into the feed. She felt the sand-like grit and tasted the elicited cloud of dust through her nostrils.

five years

She wondered how it could have already been that long since the drone arrived.

five years and seven days

That was the worst night of her life.

In her dream, a long shadow with many legs walked along and through a grove of spindly trees of light, assuring her in a cryptic voice that it would lead her back home to safety.

She asked: *safety from what*

Before she could receive a response, she heard her name spoken by a more familiar voice, and felt a pair of small hands jostling one of her arms. The landscape folded and dispersed, and this new voice said her name again, followed by the words: “*Wake up.*”

“Mm,” she murmured, suppressing all vision, “what?”

Beside her, Felicity whispered: “Something’s happening.”

Amy then realized that she was hearing even-further-away voices from out in the hall and raised her head from her pillow and listened.

“Please,” said one which sounded like Rosemary. “Please don’t do this. They’ve done nothing to deserve it.”

She sat up, blanket falling down her sleeve.

Her vision came to her, but the space was dark, and all she could see was the dim red glow of candle-lit lanterns through the passageway.

“What is that?” asked Shale, still half-asleep in the bunk overhead.

“*Shh*,” said Felicity.

“It is not a matter of what they deserve,” said another voice, that of Sister Röth. “It is simply what now must be done.”

Hearing their voices, as well as the tapping of Röth’s cane, getting louder, Felicity dove back across the room and crawled back into the sheets of her bed.

Amy threw her head back down against her pillow to make it seem as though she was still asleep.

They entered the doorframe from the hall, depleting what little light came in through the passage.

Each tap of Röth’s cane and shuffle of her crooked, calloused feet grew clearer to Amy than the last. Soon, she sensed that the Headsister was standing over her.

From over by the doorway, Rosemary whispered Amy’s name.

“She is awake,” said Röth.

Amy, from under her pillow, muttered: “I’m sorry.”

“You have done nothing wrong,” Sister Röth replied.

Other students in the room were now awake and listening. Only a couple raised their heads. None made a sound.

“The rest of you shall be informed tomorrow,” said Röth.

Amy pinched her own stomach, hoping to find that she was still dreaming.

“Do as she says, Amy,” Rosemary croaked.

Röth’s hand took Amy’s wrist through the sheet and eased it away while her other was slid underneath her head before raising it from underneath her pillow.

“What’s happening?” asked Felicity in her bunk.

As her blanket was pulled aside, Amy saw Röth kneeling beside her, her long gray hood draped over her face like a veil.

“Go back to sleep,” said Röth to the other students, pulling Amy slowly towards the edge of her bed. “All will be made clear in the morning.”

After being led out of the children’s quarters, Amy saw Sisters Dither, River, and Stone all waiting at the end of the hall for them. They passed them by, and then they followed. And they were then, upon reaching the hall that wrapped around Thel’s courtyard, joined by Sisters Wave, Walker and Hill as well. None of them spoke, aside from Röth who occasionally uttered ‘move along’ whenever Amy started to fall behind.

Soon, Amy realized that they were taking her in the direction of Thel’s northeastern tower, which was odd, especially at such an hour.

It was all so strange.

By this point in Amy’s life, she had barely ever left the temple more than a handful of times, and she had never once been woken up in the middle of the night like this.

Once in sight of the entrance to the tower’s base chamber, she saw a gaggle elders gathered outside. They were kept at bay by Sisters Mendel and Samsa, and among them was Yuga, who had since then graduated from eldership and been initiated into sisterhood.

Röth clicked her tongue and the crowd parted.

Passing through, Amy saw that, inside the chamber, stood Zoas Aphremn, Ömis, and Verhär, and that alongside them was an adolescent sapien from the village, identifiable as a member of Aphremn’s guard by his badge. They all had rifles in their hands.

On the floor between them, and under the light of the greater moon, was something hidden under a white linen sheet. It was large, and covered much of the limestone floor.

Once beyond the passage, Rosemary halted and held Amy by her shoulders as Röth huddled towards the mass in the center. She handed her cane to Aphremn, lowered herself, and drew the sheet aside.

The sight of two four-pronged paws at the ends of two long, cricket-like limbs caused Amy to press back into Rosemary who made certain that she remained upright.

As the rest of the thing was uncovered and as more limbs were revealed, Amy reached her hands back behind her and dug the ends of her fingers into the sides of Rosemary's knees, trying to push herself away from it, heels jamming against the floor.

In a voice filled with pain and fear, Rosemary said: "Do not be afraid."

"It is dead," Röth's voice then echoed. "It cannot harm you."

It was worse than anything Amy had ever seen before. It had no eyes, nor mouth. It had something like a stomach or a lung billowing out from a concavity of serrated crystal. Its shoulders were bolted onto something that could have been a ribcage if not for its exposed, jagged layers which exhibited the features of a broken and bloodied shell and grew thicker towards what seemed to have been its legs. It had neither back, front, top, nor bottom, and looked as though it had been cobbled together from the remains of many species of animal and types of machine into the general impression of a massive, half-dismembered centipede. Much of it on the outside was pale orange. The innards were bright blue and gleamed like a static maelstrom of broken glass. Upon later recollection, she would relate the texture of its ill-fitted skin to that of the illustrations of burn victims in her medical textbooks, her impression no doubt informed by the three red markings on its side which bore the signs

of having been seared into it via branding iron – a vertical line, one triangle, and another vertical line; a pyramid flanked by two pillars:



“What is that?” Amy whimpered.

Seated on the floor, Röth looked up and spoke to the young Sapien male. “Tell her what happened,” she said.

He had short blond hair and crude features and, though Amy did not know it then, his name was Hathan Agers.

His bottom lip protruded, and his nasally voice echoed: “Dis been seen on the western yonskirts early dis eve. A family a’rachnids claim’d a’ve seen it one night fore. Spake it leapt av branch a’branch in view a’thon home. Zoa Aphremn form’d a party a’vhich we been one.” He swallowed, staring at it. “Came cross it burrowin in a field nay far’v there. Fired the spread-shot. Hit one leg.”

Amy felt Rosemary remove one hand from her shoulder.

“Pursued it – fired again, causin damage...”

That same hand was then placed over her forehead.

“...proach’d it, fired again-”

“Enough,” murmured Röth. “That is enough.”

Rosemary’s hands, which always felt cold, tightened against Amy’s brow.

“Tell the child what it is, Rosemary.”

Amy could hear the words suffocating in the back of Rosemary’s throat.

“Rosemary,” said Röth sternly.

“*It’s a drone*,” Rosemary’s quivering voice finally mustered in response, returning her hand once more to Amy’s shoulder and pulling her in, “bio-manufactured for surveillance.” It sounded as if she was about to burst into tears,

The elders behind them began to whisper to one another.

Röth lifted her head, raised an arm towards Aphremn, received her cane, and said: “Return her.” She began to push herself up. “We shall inform the rest at dawn.”

The next morning, Röth’s voice rang out through Thel’s main hall: “One-hundred-seventy-one turnings of Jremmin around its sun ago,” she said, “the Initiative was terminated.” Slumped over in the tall, ornate chair of purple cedar, she still had the light gray hood on over her head. Against her lap, her hands held a glass bowl, and the bowl was large, heavy, and empty.

Every Liseian that lived in Thel was in attendance – even Sister Gunn, which was uncommon as she rarely ever came above ground anymore.

“You have all heard,” Röth continued, “of the Abandoning.”

Pacing up one side of the hall and past the stiff, pale faces of the other sisters, Dither ferried a pewter pitcher of spring water.

“Some of you have received lessons concerning the Septumvirate itself.”

Dither approached Rosemary and relayed the pitcher to her. Then, with the pitcher, Rosemary approached Röth.

“These forces are now aware of us,” Röth held out her bowl, “and they are now aware of Jremmin’s survival.”

From the pitcher, spring water was poured, filling the bowl.

“Contact shall soon be initiated.”

The pitcher was emptied.

“We knew this day would come.”

Rosemary withdrew the pitcher and stepped back.

“Let not us permit this to be a source of unfound fear.” Röth rested the bowl back into her lap. “Now, please, line up to receive your benediction.”

The students and elders all then did as she said. They lined up and, one-by-one, drank the water from her bowl, and received her guidance and blessings.

Sari was instructed to practice greater devotion, and to think only of the Ocean; Tiya, that she should commit herself to the service of others; Merisun, to sing for one hour every morning.

To Amy, however, once she had knelt and taken a drink of the water from the bowl and felt the warmth of Röth’s hands on her face, no command of any such nature was given.

Amy’s blessing, from Röth, was but one word:

mercy

It all seemed so strange to her.

“Have I ever shown you this before?”

Amy turned around and saw that Rosemary had returned and that, cradled in her arms, was a glass sphere as wide as her shoulders.

After catching up to her own train of thought, Amy responded: “Is that,” she stammered – “is that Sister Shoal’s ecosphere?”

Rosemary smiled and lowered it onto her desk. “I’m glad you remember it,” she said.

Amy exhaled slightly.

“Is everything okay?” Rosemary asked, taking notice.

Amy then smiled and nodded.

Rosemary, after pausing, smiled once more as well and beckoned with her hand. “Come have a look.”

Amy gathered herself before hopping over the threshold of the cage.

“Latch,” said Rosemary.

Fumbling back, Amy grabbed the rickety frame of the cage’s door which was still ajar and latched it shut before turning again and running to the desk and falling to her knees upon the stone floor.

With her chin upon the desk’s surface, she gazed into the ecosphere. Beyond the blurry reflection of light coming in through the window behind her (and among other things) she beheld the leaves of wild blue cabbage and stunted, carpeting blades of axonopus, all rich in billophyll.

“Notice anything?” Rosemary asked.

Amy breathed against the glass. “Everything is smaller,” she said.

Pink dewslugs fed upon the grass.

“Why do you think that is?”

Copper-colored quadrobites dug through the soil.

“Because the oxygen levels inside the glass are still what they were on when Sister Shoal sealed it?”

Soft-shelled spring-singers produced their subvibrational melodies.

“Do you remember how long ago that was?”

Pygmy harvestmen fed upon the spring-singers and quadrobites.

“Ninety-seven years.”

She watched a harvestman creeping along the underside of a cabbage leaf.

“How many cycles is that?”

She had to do the math in her head, mumbling the numbers under her breath. “– a little less than forty-two.”

“How much less?”

“Um,” she struggled to think on numbers – “a little less than one tenth of one cycle less – point-one-zero-six-four.”

“Mhm,” Rosemary replied as she walked around her desk before (once beside Amy) bending forward and kneeling slightly and looking in upon the sequestered organisms as well.

A dark-shelled quadrobite burrowed with its claws, scooping tidbits of soil aside. And in its glisten, Amy could make out the indistinct, shadowy reflections of herself and her mentor.

“This isn’t fair,” she said.

“What isn’t fair?”

“Keeping them in here like this.” She looked up at Rosemary. “We’ve made them ill-constituted.”

Rosemary smiled and placed a hand upon Amy’s shoulder. “For out here, yes – but not in there.” Her hand slid up the back of Amy’s neck. “They have everything they need in there.” It began kneading, with its fingers, the dreads of her scalp.

food

Amy knew the Ocean was real, but she only ever saw it behind her eyes. She looked back at (and into) the sphere.

air

“Perfectly well-constituted,” Rosemary chimed.

death

“Why are you showing me this?” Amy asked.

“Because,” Rosemary replied.

Amy thought of her question: *why do mutations happen*

Sister Röth had passed away one year following the drone’s arrival, and her mantle was passed down to Rosemary.

“I don’t,” said Amy – “I don’t understand.”

Somersault and Twilight were both originally Röth’s, so they became Rosemary’s as well.

“What don’t you understand?” Rosemary asked.

All Amy could do was stare, slightly shake her head, and say once more: “I don’t understand.”

Smiling, Rosemary leaned in and whispered: “That is okay.”

5

By the time that Vismund finally arrived, the last of the drills were wrapping up for that morning.

Evry and Los were there, but so was Larson, and Vismund made a point of lining up right beside the latter.

His arrival went unacknowledged at first; the others remained at attention.

In his final round of inspection for that day, Aphremn passed before them. Reaching the end of the line, he laid his eyes upon Vismund's flushed and disheveled face, shook his head, and sighed.

"Caughslewis," he said.

"Sär!" Vismund replied.

"Vhy ded ya even bother?"

"Polly, Sär!"

Aphremn had a soft baton which he sometimes pretended to strike his junior guardsmen with. It did not hurt, but he made it look convincing, and the older grunts liked to play along sometimes, making it seem as if they were injured so that the younger members of their organization would be frightened. It was generally understood that, if his usage of this baton in response to an infraction was withheld, it was a likely sign that he was genuinely upset.

Keeping it behind his back, he stepped closer, and stated: "Drill be ohwer."

Gaze fixed ahead, Vismund felt his own assuredness wane. "Sär," he said, "we been helpin at the playhouse, Sär."

"Noble," Aphremn replied. "Haps there instead, ya shon be?"

Just by his appearance one could assume that Aphremn had bad or even rancid breath – the kind that smells like onions and half-

rotten eggs. Vismund, however, noticed that it was, on this and many other such occasions, inoffensive and minty. By no means was he a handsome man, although he did have handsome eyes. Aside from that: his nose was bulbous; cheeks, sallow; brow, heavy; hair, wiry and thinning; skin, scarred by a lifetime of epidermal infection. His features were, on the whole and for lack of a better phrase, somewhat ogreish. None of that mattered though, as he was generally considered to be reliable and well-liked individual who could hurl a stone a fair distance across any field whenever such a challenge arose.

“Me duty be a’help guard the village, Sär,” mumbled Vismund.

“And ow might ya guard it if nay’veen on time ya show?”

“Time be an illusion, Sär.”

At this, Vismund could hear Larson scoff lightly through his nostrils.

“Silly,” replied Aphremn.

Hanging down from underneath the visor of his steel pickelhaube, stray strands of hair rested upon Vismund’s brow and cheeks as his vision rested upon the dirty linen of Aphremn’s collar.

Aphremn sighed. “Speak vith me come morrow’s dawn,” he said.

“Yea, Sär.”

“Us shall discuss dis.”

“Yea, Sär.”

“Us shall discuss yie priorities.”

“Yea, Sär.”

Vismund was then permitted to engage with the closing prayer before departing from the grounds with his two close friends, Los and Evry.

6

“Oh lord,” said Ömis, “there they be.”

He was the first of the three to notice what had first appeared as a twinkle in the sky.

The Isthisian science team's arrival the previous winter had been a spectacle. They had flown their white-and-blue astramaran in figure-eights and loop-de-loops before skidding onto the water and swinging around and parking a few yards from the dock upon which the crowd had gathered. A man bearing the name ‘Amananda’ got out and introduced himself and his crew, and they were all rather friendly. The team then spent the next week or so living in the village, gathering bits and pieces of information for their records. Though it all had been rather nerve-wracking, especially in the lead-up to their arrival, there was the sense throughout that all concerns were being addressed, and that great pains were being taken on behalf of every involved party to ensure that no boundaries were transgressed or toes stepped upon. The end result was that the whole saga turned out to be a fairly enriching and pleasant affair, and to see them depart was bittersweet.

The ambassador from Anadon, however, had not been proving himself to be as gracious. For one thing, there had been no agreement on the village council's part to accept his invitation (which he had issued himself). Nor had such an agreement been once requested, nor even hinted at, by anyone on the ambassador's side of things. Instead, a ‘notice’ was given simply stating that someone named *Ambassador Baaj* would be arriving on Jremmin on a particular star-date. The next ‘notice’ they received then altered this star-date. And then, so did the next. And not only that, but strange demands were being made throughout – types of food and

luxury which the people of Jremmin had never even heard of. And when Verhär requested clarification in one of his responses (and as was the case in regards to all such requests) the ambassador's next missive failed to address anything to which said response referred. So, Verhär sent an inquiry to his contacts in Isthis regarding what should be done, requesting as well that (if at all possible) some greater context be provided. But their eventual response merely stated that the ambassador's visit was acceptable, and that it would be permitted to occur.

As one might presume, this all left the zoas with the increasingly familiar impression that there was much which was being left unsaid.

Either way, the whole affair thus far had instilled in them a level of uncertainty so high that they felt compelled to dissuade and discourage the gathering of any crowds on the docks that day.

What they were looking at now, hovering steadily nearer, was a golden, featureless egg, matte in texture. The antigravitational waves by which it was propelled over the water generated overlapping circular patterns of ripples which formed a series of conical trails. This was all very pleasing to look at – that is, until they realized that this ship was creeping far nearer to the dock upon which they stood than any of them would have preferred.

“Shon,” said Verhär, stepping back – “shon us *vacate*?”

The zoas made some distance between themselves and what seemed to be the ship's immanent point-of-contact, and the subsequent collision wrought severe damage upon one of the posts.

It bounced back and floated away like a balloon until its propulsion field decreased to little more than a hum. Its movement ceased, all power seemingly cut off, and it became lifeless. If it had any doors or hatchways, they were closed and imperceptible.

A moment passed which was long enough for the zoa's astonishment to run its course and, once again, they began to wait.

It was a nice day out. They felt the breeze. The waves on the emerald water were smooth as chert, and the egg's chartreuse reflection writhed across them.

"Ya figure us shon," Ömis began to ask before trailing off.

Nethen held his hands up to the sides of his mouth and shouted: "Alo! Komavel a'Jremmin!"

There was no response.

"Be Bassador Baaj aboard?!" shouted Verhär.

Still, no response.

Ömis turned his head to them and stammered like a cat but refrained from speech for fear of being heard and eventually turned his attention back to the ship, shutting his mouth.

Nethen cocked his head and felt the sweat soaking through his ill-fitted suit. "Is a nice-lookin ship?" he said.

Then, a loud startling hiss shot out across the docks, and a ramp extended from the side of the egg.

Many villagers who lived nearby had, by then, begun to gather at their windows and on their porches. Those who were close enough to see clearly were dumbstruck as a hatch opened and shapes began to emerge. These shapes were short, scarred and bloated creatures descending in a line down the ramp. Whatever they were had been scrunched down like an accordion. They had over-ripened gourd-like skin wrapped around layers of folded crusts of fat, pointed ears tagged with numbers, stout abdomens shaped like bricks, ankles wider than their feet, and faces so flat and pinched at their centers that they were practically devouring themselves.

The zoas had to step back once these unfortunate beings reached the dock, and they felt the heinous stench of necrotic bile searing their nostrils.

Without acknowledging their hosts, these visitors stood in a circle formation at the base of the ramp and began finagling with terminal screens attached to their wrists, grunting and squealing (seemingly at one another). Their terminals then all produced a

digital sound like a synthetic brass instrument which was so loud that the zoas had to cover their ears.

"WE HAVE ALIGHTED!!!!" came a shriek emerging from out of the cacophony.

It was like a grinding, guttural buzzsaw, or a legion of power drills penetrating some new dimensional barrier. Those people of the village who lived nearby, even those who were indoors and had not yet been made aware of the ship's arrival, were severely displeased by the oddly horrific, ominous sound. Several amphibians watching from their rafts in the visible distance, as well and understandably, leapt into the water.

As the brass-like sound subsided, the shriek continued: *"WHICH ONE BE VERHÄR???"*

The zoas looked up to the top of the ramp and beheld what appeared to be (and, in fact, was) a Lithorian's disembodied, barracuda-like head rolling down upon tank-like treads.

Pickled in yellow fluid inside a glass jar, it had several rows of tiny sharp teeth, lifeless milk-white eyes, a pointed reptilian snout tilted upwards, tangled vines of black wires reaching into the exposed, de-necked base of its skull, and hieroglyph-like camera lenses fashioned in the shape of gigantic eyes on each side of the metallic base above its wheels.

They could hear the oil gushing through its innards.

"THANK YA!!!" the ambassador screamed as three of his deformed servants hobbled around to the backside of his vehicular base and opened a panel. *"POLLY FER THE DELAY!!! THERE BEEN A WARRANT FER ME ARREST!!!"*

One began soldering something inside the panel with a blowtorch whilst the other two started punching and biting them.

"WE SORTED IT OUT!!!" A large bubble pulsated upwards from within the head's mouth and rested against the top of the jar. *"WHY BE THE AIR SO DRY HERE???"*

Its wheels rolled back, crushing both feet of the solderer before jolting forward as the flame of the blowtorch scorched the stunted forearm of one of the others, causing it to screech in pain.

"MOISTURE MUST WE HAVE FER COMFORT!!!"

Some of the others began carrying suitcases down the ship's ramp as the two injured attachés started scrapping like vermin on the dock.

"DED NAY YE READ ME MISSIVE???"

Much to the zoas' dismay, the burnt one bit a finger off the other's hand and spat it into the water with a *splunk*.

"ESCALATE YON DAMPNESS!!!"

7

After drill practice let out, Vismund, Los, and Evry walked southward along the inner bank of the West River until reaching the rope bridge which they used to cross to the other side. There, as the trees became coniferous and the gravelly earth began to slant upwards, the sounds of hammers on stakes and the creaking of structures being raised to herald the celebrations of later that evening were replaced by the chirping of insects and mating calls of white ravens overhead. They followed the winding path until, eventually, they reached Bosep “Bo” Sunnuman’s shack where he and Grant gathered the jade honey of cerulean bees for the making of mead which they sold.

“Mind th’branch!” Bo shouted up through his mesh veil, bearing a large copper basin and, in it, catching the honey drizzling from the ends of Grant’s massive paw high above.

Bo’s knees bent outward and his hair ran down the sides of his face and wrapped itself around his four limbs. His shirt was neither tight nor loose. He was neither dirty nor clean. One of his boots was without laces, and had been for a while. His tail was shorter than it once was, as it had been partially severed as a result of a blowtorch accident.

On this occasion, he was bedecked in layers of safety gear.

“Keep yer heft ah th’axis!”

“RWRWRMH,” Grant cried down, sticking his arm into the tree’s interior and extracting nectar by the pawful.

Belonging to a species of large, solitary mammal native to Jremmin known as an ‘ogogwe,’ Grant had thick woolly hair, powerful stonelike claws, a long and graceful neck, sloping shoulders, a round head, serene eyes of white, and a curly tail. He

often came across as aloof and frequented Bo's company. He was thick-skinned and impervious to the stings and, thus, did not require any protective gear beyond a pair of goggles to protect his eyes.

He sneezed: **HNG-CKHGHFFFT!**

"Vigor!"

w/hhooeee!!!

Hearing a familiar sound of his nephew's whistle, Bo looked towards the direction from which it came. He saw Evry waving from the bend in the trail as Vismund and Los approached from further down the way.

"Evry!" Bo shouted. *"D'nay come nigh!"*

"Yea, Unc!" Evry replied. *"Us know!"*

"Th'cutters be piss'd!"

"Wa'd he spaken?" asked Los.

"He spake d'nay get'ny closer – the honeycutters be piss'd."

"Oh. – *Be nay dem always?!*"

"Worse a 'late!" Bo replied.

"Like they 'member ya!" shouted Vismund.

"Hah!" laughed Bo as he felt the stings on the back of his neck. *"Yea, they recall!"*

Mink-like trinket stealers licked the dried porridge from the floorboards of Bo's shack until the snap of him kicking open the screen door frightened them into fleeing unnoticed out the back. As he entered, he stumbled around the room with the basin of freshly-gathered honey cradled in both of his arms before resting it upon the table.

Evry entered from the porch as Vismund and Los waited for Grant at the wide base of the everblue trunk outside. "Ma sendeth y'eye meds an' some tea vith me," he said.

Like his uncle, Evry was a Simian, though he was of a taller and slightly lankier build.

“Fine, fine,” grumbled Bo, shedding his protective gear and running his fingers musically across a row of hanging utensils made out of scrap, bamboo, tin and tape – “meds fer me leaves an’ peeps fer me bones.”

The inside of Bo’s home smelled like rotted wood. He used to keep the windows open at all times until discerning that the glass was better suited for ‘more practical ends’ and thus removed them entirely. Evry would occasionally suggest that new windows would serve well to keep the wind out, especially during winter, but Bo would shrug at this and say that the wind was what was keeping him alive.

“Ya took yer back door out,” said Evry.

“Needed a new fence a’keep madoqua out a’me pomidors.”

“Vhy nay fell a tree?”

“Th’door been already dead; th’trees be still-kickin.” Bo took a ladle from the rack and began stirring through the honey in the basin as his other hand took a kanga egg and cracked it open.

“There be *dead* trees, Unc.”

“Rotwight feed. Na blessin, na chance.”

As Bo threw his head back and slid the yolk past his tongue, Grant bellowed outside. Vismund and Los, their voices pathetic and muffled by comparison, responded. They were trying to have a conversation with him, though they could not know for certain what he was saying. They figured that he was asking for the stingers to be removed from his hide, so they obliged him by doing so.

Swishing the egg between his few teeth, Bo pointed his ladle out the door and asked: “Ow he doin?”

“Fine,” replied Evry, knowing that Bo was referring to Vismund. “Reckless be all.”

Bo smiled, gulped the blended yolk down, and bent forward to begin picking bugs and bits of bark from out of the honey's surface. "Th'ulter seekin paper?"

Evry sat down in the chair across the table from Bo. "Ya gaw'm hook'd."

Bo hummed and extended his lips from under his well-trimmed, cream-colored whiskers. He placed them to the edge of the ladle and slurped up a sample of his harvest, bright blue eyes darting aimlessly about as he smacked his tongue against his pallet.

In through the door, Vismund ran from the porch. "Comin a'town anight, Bo?" he asked.

"Course," Bo responded – "course."

"Wa bout thad?" asked Vismund, pointing at the honey.

"Nay dis batch. Nay'nough time a'sit. More'n th'barrel, all work there ohwer. Feel free." He leaned back, placing his hands behind his head.

"Us'll be in town but a few bits," said Evry.

"Stump?" Bo asked.

"Yea."

"Ah," he nodded. "Furthest most go."

"Ya started it, na?" said Vismund.

Bo sat up in his chair and laughed: "Yea, we been... Dem mountain-birds, y'see, they... *Vell*, some fellas tried buildin a lookout pon it vhen they been – th'mountain-birds, y'see – speakin the Stump been *hallow'd* or vha've ya – fore me time it been – but story goeth them got sent – *KHRGKHJ!* Lightnin. Nado follow'd soon after an' swallow'd th'rest. Wa *we* ded – young then, y'see, an' on a Salvus like dis one much-so – me diminutive ears harken'd Zoa Ömis' old *pa* talkin down-nasty a'one a'me fillies fore one a'dem food stands – standin he been, y'see, waitin fer hez *food* an' so an' so."

"Wa'd ya de?" asked Vismund.

“*Vell*, we clamb up on th’stand – th’roof been by a stack a’crates an’ so an’ so – paint can in-clutch – nastiest color we could find, and fine been hez suit, an’ *fine* ded it seem pourin all ohwer him.” He leaned forward to pantomime his younger self pouring paint while his three audience members laughed. “So, he been mad an’ g’all hez folk chasin me, an’ we’m hearin dem folk shovin finer folk as we’m weavin th’legs a’th’crowd, an’ we figure: ‘hm, m’elder brüth be skimmyin befillied creckvays, so vhy nay go kinvise?’ Ask’d ‘*could we go vith?*’ vhen he’d left home thad after, an’ ‘na’ spake he then, but thad been fore and now we had these goons on me like mushuk on moosha, so figure me drathers suit better hez wraths than thons, so off-went ded we.” He took a swig of rubbing alcohol. “*Mh* – s’we ran an’ ran, cross th’river swam cause na time fer bridges, y’see, an’ me vay a’th’colony found,” he raised his hands upwards with a look of bewilderment on his face, “*but been nayaone there!* S’we ran an’ ran again, up th’hill an’ on a’the Stump and thad been vhere we found’em dancin an’ singin an’ laughin, an’ laugh ‘til dawn ded we – petty thing, we am.”

“S’nay’d ya start it?” asked Evry.

“Na, we jus’ spaken thad we ded sometimes. Me brüth on casion spake *he* ded, b’he also spake silly things at times.” Bo scratched his elbow. “Ol’ tradition,” he stared off into space, nodding – “ol’ tradition.”

“Who been yer filly,” asked Vismund – “the one Ömis’ pa spoke ill ah?”

“Essa been her name.”

“Wa’d he spaken a’här?”

“Is nay a’matter a’sign,” Bo waved his fingers. “Fergotten.”

“Who been she?” asked Vismund again.

Bo inhaled and ran his hands down his legs to his knees. “Older’n me,” he said. “Play’d round been all us ded. *Phibian* been she.” He laughed bashfully. “Thing fer me back then.”

“Phibians a thing fer ya?”

“Yea.” He smiled and shrugged. “Back then. Differn flavor they got. ‘*Aquilomenza*,’ they call’d it. They still call it thad?”

“Yea,” said Los as he stepped in through the door past Vismund, picking the long hairs of Grant’s fur off of his sleeveless shirt with his webbed hands. “Us still call it thad.”

Unlike the other three, Los was an amphibian, short and stout.

“Nay like th’Rachnids,” Bo laughed. “But na’fense, we d’nay figure we’d ever fancy one a’dem.”

“Essa’ve any kinlin?” asked Vismund.

“D’nay query a quiet heart such a thing!”

“Polly,” said Vismund with lowered tonation.

“*Egh*,” Bo replied.

The porch outside groaned under Grant’s weight as he leaned forward and rotated his shoulders to line up with the door.

“Vish she been here,” Bo murmured as he finagled with his utensils. “Died a’gill-rot.” Before they could respond, he leaned forward and locked eyes with Los. “Evry say’th we ya be int’rested in more issues a’mе times, boy?”

“Oh,” said Los, eyes perking up, “yea!”

“*Velp!*” Bo slapped both of his knees. “Na time in sensin waste! Evry! Go fetch me keys out a’mе shed! Us’ll blather after!”

Without a word, Evry ran out the back door towards the shed at the other end of the yard, darting between and leaping over piles of junk.

“Ya made mention a’the mountain-birds, Bo,” said Vismund, backing away from Grant as he squeezed his way in through the passageway. “Spaken sez there’ll be a few a’dem at th’creck dis eve. Haps us’ll even get dem a’go a’t’h’Stump.”

Amused by Grant’s adeptness at not tearing the whole shack down, Vismund failed to register Bo’s initial lack of response.

He did not notice at all, in fact, until he heard: “D’nay say *anyone* wa ya just said me.”

He looked up and saw Bo staring him in the eyes and nodding slowly. “*They* d’nay fancy thon kin comin down here, most unleast like *thad*. An’ *they* d’nay fancy it, the *zoas* d’nay-”

“Be nay ya datin one, though?” asked Los.

“*Is differn!*” Bo pointed a bony finger at Los. “Us be *old* an’ nayaone careth one vay or’nulter w’us spaken nor *de!* We send letters an’ she be’s much a soothe-speaker a’m’e’s anything else!” He shifted around, lifting himself partway from his chair. “Once ye run out a’usage an’ *nada* better hath a’offer, ye’ll see! Ye’ll *all* see!”

They both laughed, knowing that his rage was in jest.

He placed his weight back down, lowered his hand onto his knee, and laughed as well: “Much stated, *luck* an’ a healthy squablin a’t’h’both a’ye.” He leaned forward. “We’ll task th’stars me Evry’s th’first a’break *th’ice*,” he began to stand once again – “*thad old ice*,” his knees crackled – “*thad oldest a’ice!*”

“Old ice d’nay melt,” said Vismund.

“*Na!*” Bo’s saliva-encrusted throat crackled. “Nay like dis *new* ice, meltin in five bits a’time! They be comin down av thon *temple* cause they see th’sorry state a’ye! If only me own crop been as helpless an’ pitiful, they’d’ve taken thon pity on me!” He slapped his knees and stomped his feet and laughed until he coughed.

The storage unit beneath Bo's land was originally intended to be a bomb shelter. Poorly designed when first constructed one-hundred-something years prior, its concrete walls had cracked, and the interior had been flooded from the outside many times over. It was, at some point, restored and waterproofed, lacquered boards of wood placed in and filling its gaps, and thus served, thenceforth, as storage for excess grain. But, as food storage became less and less of a general concern, it was eventually abandoned. And then, for a while, it was the property of Larson's grandfather. And then, he sold

it to Evry's mother, who then gifted it to her brother. And then, over time, and with some help, it soon became filled it with jewelry, books, contraptions, rare metals, fossils, paintings, and other miscellanea.

Sitting beside Evry on the bottom step, Los held an old issue of *The Sylem Inquisitor* over his lap. By the light of the open hatchway above, he translated the cover story from High Isthisian into Low, and said:

“The New Isthisian Empress, Nema the First a’Maha, granted us audience in Her Magnevolence, and spake as followeth: ‘Us dwellers a’Liberty’s shadow come a’dis firm seekin shelter. Creator dath war gainst Creation. The shaper who maketh peace vith silence conquereth in triumph. Y’ask me bout me prior statements, speakin they be *Azealo-Isthonian* in nature, but novel paradigms be nay so reduceable. We am the Consummating Eschaton – all things shall flow.’”

“Thad här?” asked Evry, pointing a hairy finger to a photograph printed alongside the text.

In its center, a tall female Sapien with pale skin stood. She had dark hair done up in curls, long flowing garments stitched together by shiny knots, and a face obscured by a veil of jewels hanging from a headdress in the shape of a heron's slender profile.

Around her, men and women were gathered. All of them were Sapien; all were prim and proper. They filled up two corners of the white room with sunlight pouring in from above. Crowding together from one end of the photo to the next, they formed a wall which shaped itself around several half-finished marble statues and leaning stacks of blank canvases. There was little uniformity amongst the women. Many wore beanies, berets, loop earrings, feathers, chokers, collars, brooches, pearls, spandex, silk, vests, jackets, gloves, and so on. The men, meanwhile, all had a short mohawk or a shaved head, full beard or a mustache, a sleeveless chokha, leather gloves, and leather boots. They all, regardless of

gender, had many tattoos covering their entire bodies, exquisitely gilded gorgets and pauldrons of silver, and elegant instruments of war including (but not limited to): swords, axes, high-powered rifles, morning stars, halberds, and at least one sawed-off shotgun. Because of this, they looked like they were in the military, but the article said that they were an artist collective on the bank of the Agemo River which ran through Sylem. Most of the women were smiling whilst the men wore stoic glares.

Los noticed that a few of them looked scared.

“She seemeth almost normal here,” said Evry.

“Yea,” said Los.

“*Ight*,” came Bo’s voice as he emerged from out of the shelter’s depths. “Which a’ye be tryin first?”

He held up a clear bottle of amber-brown honeyed mead; Evry was the first to reach for it.

“Dis be the one, me brüths,” said Vismund, following Bo from out of the darkness – “dis be it.”

Evry took a sip and reeled. “*Oghk!*” he exclaimed. “*Mh!*”

Los set the newspaper aside and took the bottle from Evry and sipped. He smacked his lips and then said: “Nay bad.”

“Dath figure!” Bo laughed as he parted the two of them and hobbled up the steps. “Fire-bellied kin b’ya!”

“Wait,” said Vismund, “ya’ve still a’give us the price.”

Bo stopped, swiveled around, and looked back at Vismund, his beard pressing up against his nostrils. “Price?” he said.

“Yea. W’us owe ya?”

“Mmm,” he ran his curly nails through his yellowed whiskers and sibilated: “*price*.” He looked up at the water-logged ceiling and narrowed his bloodshot eyes. “Ow bout,” he said, turning his attention back to Vismund, “ye take Grant fishin?”

Vismund, taken aback, said: “Thad it?”

“*Psh!*” Bo turned back around. “*Thad it*.”

“Polly,” said Vismund, laughing a little.

“Poor bargainers be ye!”

“Us’ll take y’offer, Unc,” said Evry. “Is modest be all.”

“He be askin a’go fishin more’n we can liver a’late be all.”

“Us’ll take him fishin vhenever dath suit,” said Los.

“We know, we know.” Bo reached the top of the steps, entering the yard. “Ficial now,” he grumbled.

“Can us stay a lil’ longer down here?” asked Vismund.

“Svill ow’ver much time ya vill.”

Vismund then leaned forward and whispered to the other two: “Us shon repay him fer dis.”

“Ow?” whispered Los.

“*Pay we*,” Bo cried back down from the surface, “by showin dem *mountain-birds* a good time! They’ve it hard up there in thad *tomb* agether, but there be a sweetness therein. A sweetness thad yer liddle green-hair’d Sapiess friend ya been *buggin* be nay gon a’give a’ya, Caughslewis!”

“Mountain-birds be Sape as vell,” replied Vismund.

“*Pseudo!*” replied Bo, “*Pseudo only!* Looks be deceivin! Th’Ocean be wet, Byre be *strange*, and Yulah be long as cowards’ve *mange!*” Cackling from the back of his throat, he struck his palm several times against the cellar’s open, metal hatch before whisking himself away back towards the shack, still cackling.

“They be too *skinny!*” Vismund shouted.

“Y’figure?” asked Los.

“They nay all be skinny,” said Evry, “speshly dem two wa show’d last year.”

Los nodded vociferously.

“Stuck-up,” said Vismund. “They spake nay a word a’one cep Starson, Eywin, Larson, Marigold, and Marigold’s sis.”

“Are ya keepin a list?” asked Los.

“Omni,” Vismund replied, somewhat sour.

“We fancy thad they be shy,” said Evry.

“Yea,” Los concurred. “Discernment and straint be shown.”

Vismund laughed. “*Straint?* Thad wa y’are inna these days?”

“Vell, there be a certain... *class* thad they bring.”

“*Class?*”

“Yea, *class*. ”

“Y’ave na clue wa y’are speakin, Viz,” said Evry. “Liseians be redjuice. Cross the val can one speck they be a whole moon and both halves.”

“*Zerk*, ” said Los – “zerk, we spaken they be.”

“*Sorcery*, ” Evry added, leaning in.

“*Yea*, ” Los replied excitedly.

“Who fancy ya’ver bed one?” asked Vismund.

“Who?”

“Yea.”

“One?”

“Or any.”

“Aphremn,” said Los.

“Thad d’nay seem like him,” said Evry. “Th’Pallatines live right up by there, though, and ferry dem rations. We bet Eywin an’ Starson’ve gone double on a few once or twice.”

“*Egch!*” said Los. “Figure they’d de thad?”

“We’m speakin they *ded*. ”

“Bet Marigold hath,” said Vismund, arms swaying, “intrepid and all she be.”

“*Ugh*, ” said Los, “vile.”

“Na sleep fer spans now,” said Evry, shaking his head – “spans a’spans.”

“Komavel a’ya,” said Vismund, with a slight bow.

“Hope,” mumbled Los.

“Yea,” sighed Evry.

They all went silent.

Soon, standing back up straight and looking up at the ceiling, Vismund asked: “S’wa d’us figure thon *eyes* look like?”

8

Three Simian siblings, Eywin, Starson and Estri Pallatine, rode their father's carriage up the winding road to Thel. They listened to the iron bells ringing out from inside the tower above the temple's eastern wall, marking the time for noon.

The clouds, hanging so low as to nearly be fog, swallowed the top of the mountain into which Thel was carved and upon which much ivy grew. This ivy, blending the structure with the texture of its surroundings, made it so that only the most innocuous of features betrayed any sense of it having been lived in or recently constructed.

On the upper terrace nearby, Sister Mendel taught her class the ideal technique of transplanting küil roots, it having been discerned by the sisters that, given the draught, such crops would fare far better in a cooler area that year.

Upon noticing the latest tribute of rations and supplies from the village approaching by camel, she halted and exclaimed: "Ah!" She pulled her blouse back up over her shoulders as fresh black soil fell from her hands. "Dyszi, would you mind finishing the rest of this lesson for me? Our rations have arrived."

She handed her pupil the rooting trowel before hurrying over towards the gate.

"*Greetings!*" she shouted to the carriage as they neared. "*Hi!*" She waved her hand high over her head. "*Okay then!*" Hopping adeptly over the rocks, she came to the gate and turned left and started down the wide barren path. "Let us see!" Placing one hand on her hip, she pointed the other at each of the Pallatines and said: "Eywin, Starson, *aaand-*"

“Estri,” said the youngest as their carriage came to halt.

“So lovely to meet you, Estri!” She approached and offered a handshake. “My name is ‘Sister Mendel.’”

“Älo,” Estri replied, shaking Sister Mendel’s hand.

“Where might your father be today, Eywin?” Mendel asked the eldest of the siblings.

“He be sick,” he replied as he disembarked.

“Darn. Nothing serious I hope.”

“A cold,” said Estri.

“Darn! That stinks! I’m sorry to hear that!”

One of the camels bristled its lips at her as she walked around to the other side.

“He’ll be fine,” said Starson, the middle child.

“I’m sure he will,” Mendel affirmed as she leaned against the carriage near the footrest upon which Starson’s boots were planted. “And, of course, if your family needs any help – and that means anything – all you need to do is ask.”

Handing her the clipboard, Eywin and Starson both saw how she was sweating, and how the collar of her gray blouse hung low upon her chest. Eywin tried not to stare, but Starson allowed his eyes to linger.

“Ya tired?” Eywin asked.

“Yes,” she sighed. “Like they say, though, the work’s the only thing that never goes anywhere.” She craned her face up. “And it will be worth it once we’re in the village tonight,” she smiled up at the sky – “and *so rich* are the winds we’ve been receiving today!”

Eywin watched her look back down and read the index of supplies on the clipboard. She had auburn hair, and brushed loose strands of it behind her ears, laughing.

“Come down more often, ye shon,” said Starson.

In spite of the blindfold that she wore, she was (as always) able to read the words on the page, as evidenced by how she muttered the name and quantity of each item to herself as she went.

She then signed it, and handed it back to Eywin. “We would,” she said, “but we’re simply too busy most year-round.”

“Wa vith?” asked Eywin.

“Prayer.”

He took the clipboard from her. “Vell,” he said, looking across the terrace peopled by many students and elders and into the distance as he lowered the clipboard, “feel free.”

“Thank you,” said Mendel with a knowing smile and slight bow. “I will make sure to extend your invitation to the others.”

She then began calling over students to help Eywin and Starson finish unloading their supplies, and they all intermingled and chatted for a bit. Most of what they had to say was also about the weather. The elders showed more rhythm and guile than the students, but altogether none of them really had anything new or of interest to say – at least not to the Pallatines.

The brothers then re-embarked, their carriage now much lighter, and Eywin managed to get it turned around and they shoved off back down the road.

Estri, between her siblings, felt the shape of her mouth changing as she whispered: “yyyooouuuuu...”

Starson turned in his seat.

“yooouuuuu”

He watched Mendel and her class carrying sacks of grain, shanks of honeyed meat wrapped in paper, spools and reels of fine thread, and other such supplies in through the gate of their temple.

“D’nay stare, Starson” said Eywin.

“Vhy d’they say ‘you’ an’ nay ‘ya?’” asked Estri, looking towards Eywin. “Vhy d’they speak so odd?”

“Is just ow they speak,” he said.

“Is High Isthisian,” said Starson, sitting back down. “Us speak Low.”

“Wa be *low* bout it?” asked Estri.

“Is nay High,” said Eywin. “Speak na such noise.”

“Wa be it, then?” asked Starson.

“Is wa they speak,” Eywin shrugged.

“Close enough a’Low we canprehend it.”

“Yea – closer a’Low than High, or Low a’High itself even.”

“So,” said Estri, “be it Low?”

“Differrn kin, haps,” said Eywin.

“D’they speak High in Mervéda?”

“Some folk.”

For a moment, there was only the creaking of the wheels and the sounds of the camels.

Then, Estri continued to whisper: “*Youuuuuuuu – youuuuu-*”

“They d’nay spaken ‘*me*’ neither” said Starson, leaning in and whispering into his little sister’s ear. “They spaken ‘*my*.’”

Estri laughed and recited: “*Myyyyyyyyyy...* ”

They looked out over the two-dozen-or-so Liseians tending the many-layered terraced garden wrapped around their temple.

“Av where’d they come?” asked Estri.

“Nayaone knoweth cep dem,” Eywin replied.

“Vhy be there na boys?”

“Nayaone knoweth cep dem.”

Hand-in-hand, shoulder-to-shoulder, and with visions extinguished, the near-entirety of the Liseian student body, which included both students and elders, lined the benches of four wooden tables spanning the length of Thel’s main hall. In all, they were one-hundred-twenty-seven in number.

At the head of the hall sat the sisters. Their table was elevated slightly, and they faced the students. Twenty-nine in number, each was manifesting a globe of light and shadow that churned around and enveloped their head like a window into the heart of a star-scattering storm.

Then, from nowhere, a voice like a thousand distant winds blowing in reverse, and in an ancient tongue which preceded the separation of the Four Cosmic Zoas and Albion's Fall, intoned:

Felicity could not help but smell the roasted esox.

It had lemon.

Slabs of goyra simmered in a stew of minced küI and fresh cloves of allo.

Steamy grompers stuffed with a thick selino dahi and drizzled with a garum-based mixture of bloodnut milk and kanga stock.

The bell then rang for a third time.

The students responded: "*Oamen.*"

Felicity could smell the sageberry-infused candles lit and arranged at the base of the statue of Enitharmon behind her.

Rosemary then, seated at the center of the sisters' table, raised her head and made her announcement: "I have decided to withhold my speech this year."

A silent wave of relief and excitement rolled throughout the hall.

"You may now begin eating."

"Summer skies

– Open as my heart

– Free your light

To rip the night apart,

For as we rise

Shall soon my soul depart

To hide for now

And evermore

The glory of your art."

"How about *glories* instead of *glory*?" said Sari, "I think that would sound better."

"It should say *our* souls, not *my* soul," said Kyra.

"She wasn't asking for your advice," said Felicity.

"Yes I was," said Amy, folding her poem back into her pocket. "And I like the feedback. Honestly, the last line is the one I would like to change the most."

"Why?" asked Felicity.

"I don't know."

"But what's wrong with it?"

"There's nothing *wrong* with it. I just don't think it works."

“Well, I don’t like it,” said Kyra who had bright skin and long, pitch-dark hair and, similar to Amy, was of diminutive stature. “I don’t like any of it.”

“Why don’t you like it?” asked Sari.

“It’s not philosophical enough.”

“It’s not?” asked Tiya, the youngest of the group.

“It’s like she wasn’t even *trying* to say anything *deep*.”

“Well, that makes sense,” said Felicity, “Amy doesn’t even like philosophy.”

Kyra turned her face to Amy. “How do you *not* like philosophy?”

Amy, having just taken a bite of her food, chewed as she raised a finger before swallowing and said: “A *philosopher* is just a mystic who never learned how to pray.”

“And?”

“And I’m only interested in cause and effect. If I can’t see it, or feel it, then why should I care?”

Kyra scoffed and looked the other way. “*Juvenile*,” she said.

Sari, with short strawberry hair and to the other side of Kyra, slurped a salted gajdra from its shell.

“Good?” asked Kyra.

Sari smiled and nodded: “*Mhm.*”

Lunch was livelier than it usually was, which was usually the case that particular day of the year. However, by now, most had eaten their fill and were beginning to leave.

Amy was still eating because she had arrived late.

Felicity, having spent much of her morning repairing the stone steps that led down to the northeastern grove, arrived early and was now wrapping up her third serving. She lifted her head and threw her long, platinum hair behind her broad shoulders and, chewing, asked: “So what’s on everyone’s schedule today?”

“Mitochondrial interpophany,” said Sari.

“Xylokinetic harmonimorphics,” said Tiya.

“Laundry,” said Kyra.

“Still?”

“It’s for that thing that I did,” she crumpled her napkin and chucked it onto her plate. “I’m still burning time for it.”

Felicity looked at Amy. “What about you?”

“I’m,” Amy had to think for a second – “oh shoot. I think I’m taking care of the stables today.”

“Oh, hey!” Felicity responded. “So am I!”

“Oh!” Amy replied. “Lovely!”

9

Los and Evry had already gone outside, and they were frolicking around with Grant. They took turns holding onto his arms for as long as they could while he spun them around, and he was careful to not strike them into a tree.

“Still got thad necklace,” Bo murmured in observation, belching a little.

“Course,” Vismund replied, wringing the alcohol from one of Bo’s leg bandages (which he had offered to change).

The alcohol in which the bandages were soaked was intended to prevent the spread of some kind of fungus, though Vismund knew little in way of specific details.

“Thad be good,” Bo grumbled, looking out the window and into the yard where the other three played. “He’d’ve fancied thad.”

The ravens had departed, and the woods were quiet.

“Ow be me cousin these days?” he asked.

“Codar?” asked Vismund. “Nay sure.”

“*Bastards*,” he spat. “Gaw’m locked up there’n thad *nightmare castle*, sayin him allathing be ight!” He leaned back in his chair, inhaling long and sharply through his nose, driving the excess snot down the back of his throat. He then leaned forward, grabbed a napkin from a nearby corner of the table and blew into it.

As Bo removed the napkin from his face, Vismund could see his whiskers trembling beneath his snot. Then, casting the napkin aside, he covered his eyes with his fingers and leaned back once more, chair creaking.

Through the window, they could barely hear Los and Evry barking orders at Grant as though taking him prisoner.

“Can ya keep an eye out, me boy?” Bo muttered. “Been so long since we’ve seen him.”

“Been a long time since,” Vismund repeated before trailing off, unsure of what he was about to say.

Bo uncovered his eyes, shifted in his seat, ran both of his hands down his pants legs, and sniffed. “Since wa?” he asked.

“*Vismund!*” shouted Los outside. “*Us still need a’find towels!*”

Nearby, Evry cried: “*Yaaaaaagh!*” as he swung a fallen branch downwards into a nearby bush.

Looking towards the window, both of Bo's eyes gleamed with pride and adoration.

Vismund got up, walked over, and knelt beside where Bo was seated.

“They be good kinlin,” Bo muttered as Vismund began wrapping the bandage around his leg. “*All ye be good kinlin. Dem two out there, though – they be more innocent than yerself or we.*”

After staring out the window for a little while longer, Bo looked down at Vismund.

“D’we seem,” he paused – “*kay a’ya?*”

“D’ya seem kay?” Vismund asked. “*Wa’ya mean?*”

Bo inhaled through his nostrils, and his chest expanded before deflating as he spoke. “Can ya promise me sumn?” he said.

“Course,” Vismund replied.

Bo swallowed more spittle, parted his lips and sighed once more before speaking: “If ya notice,” he paused, swallowed again, and continued: “if ya’vever notice me startin a’ferget me words, or losin track a’where we am like me cousin, we vish ya a’swear me an oath thad ya’ll kill me fore it dath get bad.”

Outside, a wind ran through the tops of the trees; a bird of prey screeched in the distance.

“Vill ya de thad fer me, me boy?”

Vismund felt the rubbing alcohol draining down over his fingers. “Ow,” he could hear the dull breaking of its drops upon the floorboard – “ow de ya vish me ah...” He could not finish the sentence.

Nevertheless, Bo answered:

“A pillow – ”

They both stared.

“ – ohwer me head.”

Los and Evry were aware that something was wrong after Vismund came out of the shack. He did not say much, and only seemed like he wanted to leave whilst showing no concern for where to or what for.

As they walked back towards the village, he stopped and began crying. He ran over to the nearest tree and pressed himself against it. When they asked him what was wrong, he proclaimed:

“Is Yasri!”

They were beside him.

“She just – she *just* vill nay let me–”

“D’nay lose faith in yerself, me brüth!” said Los.

“Yea,” said Evry, “bound agether, yerself an’ her! Is wa the Fates decreed! Remember?”

fore it dath get bad

“She know’th y’are better’n Larson! She be *testin* ya be all!”

“Yea, ya know ow dem fillies be!”

“Thad,” Evry stammered as his voice began to quake with pity and concern – “thad be wa maketh life so int’restin!?”

They were repeating things he had said to them in the past.

He turned his head to hide his face.

The sap and bark pressed against his nose and cheeks.

The tree became stuck to him in bits and pieces.

He felt the ants crawling through his eyebrows, and across the exteriors of his lids, which were shut.

10

“Burning bright;
Fire so cold.
Distant satellite,
Its way untold,
Drifts out freely
Beyond fate.
Only stars remain;
All else must wait.”

Sitting in the window of their dormitory, Felicity smoked a cigarette of moss she had rolled for herself while Saan, her pet snake, slithered up one of her arms. “Beautiful, Amy,” she stated, shaking her head. “*Freaking* beautiful.”

Amy, sitting cross-legged on one of two beds, smiled and said: “thank you.” She closed and tied her journal and slid it into the gap between the stone wall and her wooden nightstand. She then pulled, from the same place, her study atlas. Loose-leaf sheets of graph-paper peeking out from between its pages. She opened it and started jotting down notes.

Their window was on the lowest level of the concave northwestern side of Thel, meaning their view was of the sheer rock-face on the other side of the river-cut chasm. Hardly any sun came in during the day, especially seeing as there were higher floors which extended across the chasm and blocked it out. It was like living under a bridge, though they still received enough light to get along by.

Saan made a soft hissing sound in Felicity’s ear.

“Saan says it’s his favorite poem you’ve ever written,”

Amy looked up from her atlas and blushed. “Well thank you, Saan.” She covered her face with one hand, pretending as if she had to scratch an itch. “Too kind,” she mumbled.

Saan was a new snake. He was hatched from an egg given to Felicity by Sister Samsa after her first pet snake, whose name was Aden, passed away from an illness that previous spring.

Amy had liked Aden a lot. He was wise and playful.

Saan was nice too. But she missed Aden, even though she was never actually able to learn Snake herself and had to rely on Felicity as a translator for the both of them.

“Do you want this?” Felicity asked, holding up the last of the little triangular sandwiches she took from the mess hall.

Amy looked at it. “Does it have naurises?” she asked.

“Uh-huh,” said Felicity.

“I’m good.” Amy refocused on her studies.

“I thought you liked naurises.”

“I do, but...” she trailed off. “Have you seen the decorations over the village this year?” she asked.

“Naw,” said Felicity, taking a bite of the sandwich.

“When I was dropping by Kyra and Min’s earlier, I got a pretty good look at it.”

“Do you,” Felicity gulped – “do you think they have more of it up than they did last year?”

“Yeah, it looks like it to me!” Amy began drawing circles in her notes with a compass. “It seems like they put more of it up every year!”

“Hm. Yeah. Hey, can I...”

Amy raised her head. “– Yes?” she asked.

Felicity, feeling Saan constrict himself tighter around her arm, leaned forward to put her snack down. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” Amy replied.

Felicity then said nothing.

“What is it?”

A voice echoed from down the hall: “*Good morning!*”

Perking up, Felicity chucked her cigarette out the window and into the chasm, stepped onto Amy's workstation desk and, using it to lower herself to the floor, bellowed: “*Be thad who we figure it be?!*”

The approaching clamor of clapping footsteps, jangling anklet bells and laughter distinctly that of Sister River (a favorite amongst the smokers who lived in the temple, for she lacked a sense of smell) preluded the appearance of her wide, wrinkly face, smeared and splattered with custard and pastry batter, from the other side of the beaded curtain hanging in their entranceway. “Good morning!” she sang again.

“Good morning, Sister!” they both chimed in return.

“Oh, I'm so sorry to bother you two. It's just that – *oh*, you know – the Council never gives me enough *sugar* for me to make what I feel I *must*. You wouldn't happen to have any I could borrow, would you?”

“Sure thing,” said Felicity, stepping over to her own workstation where her sugar sat in a small ceramic bowl beside her tea kettle.

“How are you both doing today?” asked River.

“Marvelous,” said Felicity.

“Good,” said Amy.

“Oh, that's good!” River laughed. “That is *so* good to hear!”

Felicity carried her sugar bowl over to River, and River, standing in the doorway, received it.

“*Thank you,*” she said. “I really am so sorry that- I...” Subject to frequent waves of absent-mindedness, River trailed off, her eyes becoming dislodged from any point of focus. “Um,” she said.

“It's okay, Sister,” said Felicity, “you would not have asked if you did not need it.”

She looked up at Felicity once more and smiled, and her head tumbled about underneath her gray shawl. “Well thank you!”

“What are you making, Sister?” Amy asked.

“Uhhh,” River thought deeply before responding: “*boortsog!*” She then turned and shuffled back into the hallway. “*Lots and lots of boortsog!*”

They listened to the footsteps fade and, in their waning seconds of audibility, turn into a clumsy skip.

Felicity twirled around, sighed, and fell sideways onto Amy’s bed, facing her. “So,” she said, “anyways...”

River began singing as she reached the end of the hall.

“...there’s this *thing* that some of us were invited to that’s happening tonight, aaand I was wondering if maybe you would like to tag along?”

“You almost knocked over my worms,” said Amy.

“What?”

“My worms.” She pointed at the tiny tray of meal worms that she had been dissecting the night before. “You almost knocked them off of the table.”

Behind her blindfold, Felicity’s eyes rolled. “Sorry.”

“I mean, I shouldn’t have left them out, but please be more careful.”

“I will – now, do you wanna go or don’t you?”

“Go where?”

“To the West River. A bunch of people from the village are getting together for a salamander hunt, and there’s an open invitation to any Liseians who’d like to join this year.”

“What?” Amy asked.

“Like a party,” Felicity stated, scratching the back of her neck.

Amy had to think very hard for a couple seconds. “I don’t,” she stammered – “I don’t remember that being in the program.”

“Well, that’s because it’s not in the program.”

Amy shifted herself around, suddenly feeling very uncomfortable. “Who,” she stammered again – “who’s going to be there?”

“Well, Kyra, Min, Sari and I are all going,” Felicity counted on her fingers, “but they’re also asking around, so maybe others too. Aaand, like I said, some of the villagers will be there?”

“Which ones?”

“I don’t know if you’ve ever met any of them.”

“Why would I attend a gathering of people I don’t know?”

Face resting against her palm, Felicity pursed her lips and hummed: “Hmm, maybe I should not have mentioned it.”

Still sitting cross-legged and upright, Amy cocked her head and asked: “Are you trying to use reverse psychology on me?”

“You are so paranoid.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“We’re going to be elders by this time next year, Amy. Have you thought about that *at all*?”

“Not really.”

“Really?”

“Why would I think about that?”

“Because you’re getting *older*? And because you’re gonna *die* one day?”

“So?”

“The older we get, the less *slack* we’re gonna get. We won’t be able to get away with *anything* soon.”

Amy scoffed. “Becoming an elder’s not *that* big of a deal, Filly. I mean, even the sisters still get away with *some* stuff.”

“Like what? Pinching grapes?”

“You’d be surprised.”

Felicity laughed. “Yeah, I *would*! Because it doesn’t seem like they ever do *anything*! All they ever do is *read-and-pray-and-read-and-pray, every-night-and-every-day*. And not only that, but they are *way* stricter with one another than they are with any of *us*. ”

“Well, Fil, the good news is that we’re not that close to sisterhood.”

“Not yet, but we’re getting there. Elderhood’s the first step.”

“Well,” Amy felt her chest tighten – “we still have time.”

“A year’s not that much time.”

“It’s, uh – it’s something.”

Felicity laughed. “Tell me something that isn’t.”

“Stop being such a *goof*.”

“Who’re you calling a goof?”

“You are the *Magi-Supreme* of Goofdom.”

“Wouldn’t you like to know what it’s like?”

“What what’s like?”

“What *it’s* like.” Felicity placed her hand atop Amy’s. “Don’t you ever think you may eventually regret never testing your own boundaries at least a *little*?”

“Fil,” Amy sighed as she slid her hand away, “I appreciate you thinking of me, but I’m not interested in putting myself at risk like that.”

“There *isn’t* any risk. That’s the best part! We already have all of that figured out!”

Amy, once again, paused to think. And then she asked: “Who else did you say is going?”

“Well, like I said: Kyra, Min and Sari, but probably also Tiya, Phellelope, Shale, and Merisun.”

“And where did you say it was?”

“The West River?”

“Where on it?”

“Oh it’s,” Felicity scratched her nose, “up at the colony...”

“The what?”

“The colony,” she sniffed – “the old colony.”

Amy, leaning back, furrowed her brow. “Uh,” she said, “that is *not* where we are allowed to go.”

“Right,” Felicity shot back.

“We can’t,” Amy paused – “I don’t think,” she paused again – “I don’t think it’s a good idea to,” she paused once more.

“Yeah, look, I know,” said Felicity, “but the villagers go there all the time, and they’re no more capable than you or I. And it’s not like there’s anything actually *dangerous* there.”

There was laughter in the halls. A group of students passed on their way to early afternoon classes.

Amy got up. “Thank you for inviting me, Fil,” she said nervously, “but I,” she began loading classwork into her satchel – “I feel I must decline.”

“You won’t tell anyone,” said Felicity, still reclining on the bed, “will you?”

“I would never say anything to get you in trouble.”

“Will you then tell yourself that you’d be keeping me *out* of trouble and *then* tell?”

Recalling (and cringing over) the fact that she *had* done that sort of thing in the past, Amy threw her satchel strap over her shoulder and began turning towards the exit. “It just,” she said – “is *not for me*. That is all. But you go and have fun.”

Felicity stood up and got right beside her. Much taller, she looked down at the top of her friend’s head. Amy gripped her strap and did not move. From hardly an inch away, Felicity asked:

“How do you know unless you’ve tried?”

Though Amy had departed from their dormitory resolute in her refusal, her and Felicity’s conversation nevertheless hung in her thoughts like a bad dream. She arrived one minute late to class, sat at her desk, and struggled to pay any attention at all to the lesson. She knew she would have to see Felicity again that afternoon at the camel stables. When that class (her only one for the day) ended, she left for the stables in a hurry, hoping to finish her tasks before

Felicity could get there. But, upon arrival, she discovered that she was already too late.

“Howdy,” said Felicity, moving hay with a pitchfork.

“Hi,” Amy replied, moving toward the buckets stacked at the opposite end of the barn.

“So, have you changed your mind yet?”

Amy did not respond.

“Don't do that.”

“Don't do what?”

“That thing that Rosemary does.”

Amy, once again, did not respond.

“I said *knock it off*,” Felicity snapped.

The cliffs east of Thel stood high above the seashore. No railings or buildings were close by – just an empty field of blue grass kept low by the camels’ grazing.

The wind had picked up since that morning

Felicity had no trouble keeping up with Amy. They each carried two buckets of water – one in each hand.

“*Come on!*” she shouted over the wind.

Amy cried back: “What if I don't *want to?!?*”

“I *really* think you should!”

“What if I have no *interest in it?!?*”

Reaching the cliff, Amy emptied the first of her buckets over the side.

“*Look*, we already have the transits made to take us where we need to go!”

“Transits?” Amy nearly dropped the other bucket. “You made *transits?!?*”

Felicity stammered: “Y-yeah?”

“With what *ink!?*”

Felicity did not know how to respond.

“With what *ink*, Felicity?!”

“I don't know where they got the ink from! It doesn't matter! We'll use them once to get to the party and-”

“Can you please stop *saying* that?!” Amy interrupted.

Felicity paused. “Stop saying what?!”

“That *word*!”

Taken aback, she soon realized what Amy was referring to.
“‘Party?!’”

Amy turned and stormed back inland towards Thel.

“Amy!” Felicity hurried to empty her own buckets over the cliff. “*I'm not going to force you!*”

“That’s what it feels like you're doing!”

Felicity had to run to catch up. “What?!”

Amy turned to face her and screamed: “*I said that’s what it feels like you’re doing!*” She then broke into an uneven sprint back towards the stables and the temple which sat atop a rolling embankment of vapors.

“*I'm pressuring you!*” Felicity shouted before giving pursuit. “*It's different!*”

Amy passed under the stable loft.

“Vitality is important for life, right?” said Felicity, following in behind her. “There wouldn't be *animals* otherwise, and without *animals* there wouldn't be any *plants*, and without *plants* there isn't any *oxygen*, and everything would just be a big, flat, lifeless *rock*! Right?!”

Amy threw her buckets aside with a dull clatter, crouched while facing a corner and covered her ears. “Life does not depend upon me going to a...”

Standing over her, Felicity let her arms fall and sighed. "Can you really not even say it?"

"I can," Amy responded.

"Then prove it."

"No?"

"Say 'party.'"

"No."

"Why not?"

Amy got up and moved past Felicity towards the exit and the latter blurted out:

"I still have your poem about the sailor!"

Amy halted, uncovered her ears and turned around. "What?" she asked.

Felicity, already full of regret, failed to respond.

"I thought you said you *burnt* that."

Though her friend's silence was unabated, Amy was told everything she needed to know by the uneasy grimace plastered across Felicity's face. Thus, she turned around and scurried back out beyond the loft and towards the temple and Felicity, once again calling out her name, followed.

By the time Felicity got to their dormitory, Amy had already torn the sheets from her bed and onto the floor and was rifling through the drawers of her desk.

"Amy, they'll hear you," said Felicity nervously.

"Where is it?!" She hurled a paper stack across the floor before removing a drawer and flipping it upside down, spilling its contents.

"It's not in here."

Amy chucked the emptied drawer aside.

Felicity recoiled at the sound and was shoved by Amy who stormed her way back into the hall.

Unsure at first of where her feet were taking her, Amy soon realized and began walking faster.

She came to an intersection where a group of five elders were walking towards her from another corridor.

She hurried past, trying to hide her face as she heard Felicity shouting muffled apologies behind her.

The bell tower was the main place where one could find privacy at Thel. It was the highest point, not just of the temple, but of any structure in the valley. Only the peak of the mountain itself looked down upon it.

Amy opened the hatch in the floor from below and climbed through. She then rolled over and tried placing all of her weight on top of it, but Felicity was strong enough to push it open with ease anyways.

“Can you *please* just try to act civil?” Felicity said.

“You want me to be *civil?!?*” Amy scrambled to her feet. “*You’re the one blackmailing me and you’re telling me to be civil?!?*”

“Will you just keep your voice down?” Felicity said as she gently pressed down against Amy’s shoulders. “I’m *not* blackmailing you.”

“Then what *are* you doing?”

Felicity thought it over for a second. “Okay,” she said, “I *am* technically blackmailing you. That is *technically* what is happening.”

Amy turned away, swung her hands onto the cobblestone railing, and shrank in on herself.

“I’m doing this for your own good, though.”

Her head sunk between her shoulders.

“You have to actually go out into the world sometimes.”

“Have you,” she croaked – “have you shown it to anyone?”

“No,” Felicity lied, “but I have it somewhere where only *I* can find it.”

Amy lifted her brow and looked through the fog and upon the village below. There were even more colored kites, flags and glimmers of canvas awning than there had been that morning.

“You aren't meant to spend your whole life up here looking at worm intestines.”

A cloud released its hold upon the mountaintop above.

“I mean, would you *seriously* rather watch that stupid play for the thousandth time?”

INTERLUDE

They stood on the northern bank of the East River as the afternoon grew dim. Just west of Thel and east of the Engine where the forest became mountainous, the surface of the water still frothed and spun along with the current as a result of the rapids further upstream.

The Arachnid camel-herder was allowing his flock one more drink for the day when his youngest son, who was accompanying him, asked him why Salvusday was of such great significance.

In a series of clicks, he replied by telling him that their ancestors from Ootheca agreed to live on Jremmin one-hundred-seventy-one years prior, adding that this was before camels were introduced to the valley. The expectation of their peoples' residency was that they would help care for and maintain the terraforming Engine to help it achieve a breathable level of oxygen on the planet, dwelling until then within the walls of the sealed-off colony and venturing out into the inhospitable open only when absolutely necessary.

For some unknown reason, however, their colonist ancestors were betrayed and abandoned by those who had sent them. Those who had been left in charge of the colony by the Septarians departed in the middle of the night. And, from that point forward, there were no escape crafts, nor any further deliveries of rations. The breathable air they had been given started to run out, as did all of the food, and the other species of settlers thus commenced fighting one another, as was common practice among their kind.

Still being at such a young age, and especially never having heard this story before, the camel-herder's son expressed his interest and asked his father what happened next.

The camel-herder then pointed with his shepherd's crook towards Thel and told his son that the night upon which the radios went dead, and the final transmissions from central command had been received, was the same night upon which *they* had first arrived.

The son knew that by 'they' his father meant the Sapien-looking women who wore blindfolds, and who walked along the mountainsides north of town many early mornings. They were always at a distance from the porch of his grandfather's home, so they were little more than dots to him. Supposedly, they came into the village on occasion, but he had yet to see one up-close. Earlier that Spring, one of the occasional teachers at his school, a kind lung-haver named 'Thulin,' taught them that they were called 'Liseians.' A friend of his asked to see a photograph of one, but Thulin said that Liseians did not like having their pictures taken, and that they were something called 'intensely private,' which meant that they did not like to talk or have their picture taken unless they had to – something which was equally true (if not more so) of all Arachnids.

The father then said that, according to witnesses, they were like ghosts showing up out of thin air when they first appeared, wandering the sealed passageways and crannies of the colony structure, and he said that there were only five of them then.

Once gathered in the commons, these five gave their names and a single suggestion for the settlers to abide by:

'Gather forty-four barrels of sap of the powder-sage trees.'

The father then mentioned that, in those days, powder-sage trees could only be found growing on the opposite side of the valley.

The Liseians then vanished with no further elaboration.

Seeing no other options in the face of death, a group went out to gather the sap. Since all trees, in general, were smaller back then, what occurred next came as a surprise to all who bore witness to it. Upon having been tapped, the sap issued forth at such a high volume and at such an advanced rate that, by the next day, all forty-four barrels had been gathered and transported back to the colony.

The outsiders thus re-appeared the following night, and there were eight of them then.

They poured a cup of the sap into the soil of a pomidor sprout in the nursery.

Then, they had another suggestion. This one, they said, had to be relayed to a specific member of the colonists' community. Thus, upon their request, they were granted an audience with the one called 'Fisk.'

Fisk was a simian of middle-age, originally an 'operations supervisor' with a military background. He had assumed the position of head engineer in charge of the Engine's maintenance and operation after all members of higher ranking than himself snuck away in their escape crafts. When many around him had begun drinking themselves to death, Fisk persevered and insisted instead that efforts to terraform Jremmin not only be ongoing, but accelerated. He rallied his fellow settlers on many an occasion for, once the Engine became his responsibility, he was unwilling to allow their great mission to fall to the wayside. He was going to ensure that the project moved ahead unabated for the survival of his children, grandchildren, etc.

So, in a crowded office room at the base of the Engine itself, and speaking with their own peculiar dialect, the Liseians told Fisk that the terraformation of the planet was occurring too rapidly and had to be slowed down. But he was skeptical. His advisors accused the strange women of practicing the forbidden art of chronomancy (time travel), and they also demanded to know just how it was that they had managed to arrive on Jremmin as there had been, at no time, any unaccounted-for radar signatures detected entering (nor exiting) the atmosphere.

Fisk himself also expressed mistrust. He reckoned that the Liseians had been watching them, either from afar or while invisible, and that they chose in either case to *not* reveal themselves until *after*

the colony had *already* been abandoned-and-thus-rendered-helpless.

The eight Liseians were patient and offered little in ways of rebuttal. When asked how they had gotten to Jremmin, they did not speak, nor did they when asked where they were from.

The first of only two further questions they responded to in any way whatsoever was *why* they had come, to which they provided their second suggestion:

‘Lower the engine’s polar heat output.’

The second question they then responded to was *why* the polar heat output needed to be lowered, to which they said:

‘So that you do not all die.’

After that meeting, all but one vanished. The one who stayed said her name was ‘Ebsi,’ and she lived amongst the settlers from that day forward.

Charming and playful, Ebsi generally spoke in a less evasive manner than the others had. She befriended a boy of the settlement whose name was ‘Kes Esod,’ and ingratiated herself within his family.

Kes lived with his parents and nine siblings in a 500-square-foot apartment-like unit inside of the colony consisting of a main room in which they slept, ate, lived, etc., a bathroom, and a closet. There was not any space on the floors at night, so when Ebsi began staying with them, she often slept on the ceiling or walls.

The mother of their household was the first to refer to her as “E,” which soon became what everyone called her.

Kes’ father was a worker at the Engine named ‘Loach’ and he was so far down on the social pecking order that he had never met nor even spoken with Fisk. His job was to turn a wheel five floors beneath ground level whenever a siren went off in his ear, and there were two-hundred-fifty-nine others with the same job as him.

As Kes befriended E, Loach and the rest of the family found themselves the center of much unwanted attention. There was

terrible gossip. Many of the children's friends grew wary of them, and Loach being called upon daily by the Settlement Council (of which Fisk was a member) to provide confidential briefings regarding the enigmatic outsider's behavior and possible motives.

E was said to have been having many small adventures during her first few weeks in the colony, doing good deeds and earning the settlers' trust. When she was not spending time with Kes, she was proving herself as a proficient mediator of conflicts, able to disarm any situation through the slightest of gestures or jokes. She also kept the washer women company as they worked in their silicone mill, and they took a special liking to her. To everybody, there was the sense that she could see through them. She was also said to have been seen in more than one place at the same time by separate people, though the veracity of these claims is uncertain to this day. (The fact that she was always blindfolded, but could see as well anyone else, was, of course, what often left the biggest impression).

The workers in the nursery, meanwhile, began recording phenomenal growth in every food source they introduced the tree sap to. They discovered a bacteria in the sap which, when applied to the soil, established a symbiotic relationship with the plant and produced a variety of specialized enzymes capable of breaking down organic macromolecules which increased nutrient availability in the soil, thus leading to improved plant growth and biomass as well as a surge in the overall production of food.

Soon, another meeting was arranged whereat Fisk, Ebsi, the Esod family, and the colony's chief engineers and ecologists sat around a table.

The ecology staff gave a presentation of new evidence indicating that the lungs of the native animals which had been adapted to lower levels of oxygen were becoming ill and riddled with disorders at an unexpected rate. They suggested that increased usage of the Engine was the primary cause of such illnesses.

The engineers then presented a model which showed that, as a result of excessive heating, the electric coils buried at the planet's northern and southern poles were putting out more thermal energy into the air than was necessary. This excess air rose through patches of melted water above the ice rather than being conducted *into* the ice itself. This meant that, whilst it might increase the number of years until an ideal atmosphere could be achieved, lowering the output would help conserve energy which could then be used to help the colony endure the coming winter.

Thus, in spite of an outburst from one of his advisors at the table, Fisk relented and graciously agreed to lower the Engine's settings.

Whilst life began to calm down after that, there were still problems which had to be faced day-to-day. There was finally a decrease in the suicide/murder-suicide rate amongst those left behind, but the recent uptick had resounding consequences across all vocations and facets of life. It left several necessary tasks with no one sufficiently trained to accomplish them, not to mention the severe psychological damage wrought upon the community.

Then, a Liseian named 'Jomah' appeared and began living in the colony, and she was very kind, and began providing services and resources to those affected.

And then, another named 'Ishaua' arrived, and she was very knowledgeable, and began tutoring the workers in whatever fields they needed to master to thus ensure that all necessary tasks could be accomplished.

The camel-herder waved his shepherd's crook and produced a loud clicking from behind his wings. The camels stopped drinking. The son waited for his father to continue the story, and for a long time nothing was said between them. They watched the camels slowly exit the river bed, moving towards the center of the valley. The camels, like many lifeforms on Jremmin, were blue. Each had: a hump, long neck, and sloping snout; small, rounded antlers

running from the end of their nose to the crest of their head and which, after adolescence, would become gnarled and grow wildly into various shapes and sizes; narrow mouths and long tongues that they used to eat termites and ants, though they could still chew on grass and leaves; short, purplish stripes which became more pronounced with age; a narrow orange mane that stretched in a line from the back of their heads to the base of their spine where it became a long tail of dark hair like that of a horse; a pink secondary pouch like that of a frigatebird used to store excess oxygen hanging from the underside of their neck; round, dark eyes with an un-teary matte texture which made them – despite lids which could be shut – resemble those of a cicada.

After the camels had left the ravine and began heading the long way back home, their shepherd closed the gate entrance to the area and lifted his son upon his shoulders before following them. Eventually, after a long pause characteristic of the way in which Arachnids recounted past events, he resumed and spoke of how, by that winter, things at the colony were running smoothly, and how everyone knew their place and what needed to be done.

He said that the most pressing issue facing the settlers, however, had not yet been resolved: they had been left with only enough oxygen to survive until early that next fall, and they had no means of producing any more.

There had already been a fifteen-point-eighty-two percent oxygen level in Jremmin's atmosphere before the settlers' arrival; by then, the Engine had gotten that up to fifteen-point-eighty-*three*.

(They needed it to be twenty).

Whilst they had suits which could extract what little oxygen there was in the air outside and provide it at a breathable rate to whoever was wearing it, they only had ten of these suits, and each had a maximum lifespan of a few weeks.

Few chose to reflect upon this predicament deeply.

Once the accounts of the Liseians' miracles had become numerous, however, Fisk went to them to ask what could be done to resolve their dilemma.

Without hesitation, they described to him an undiscovered animal which moved in herds across the sand-swept dunes of the Western Desert. They described a type of moss which grew upon this animal's fur. They said that these animals had evolved in mutual fashion with this moss. The moss extracted its nutrients from the camels' sweat and, in turn, seeded their bodies through the pores of their skin with additional oxygen, giving them an unusual level of endurance. They also described to Fisk the process of '*burgeoning*' whereupon, within no more than one minute of time following every camel's death, the moss which had grown upon its back since birth generated and expelled a single drop of a liquid element. According to them, this element was powerful, and brought forth, from wherever it fell, an oasis overnight.

Fisk then brought the Liseians to the lab of a friend of his, a brilliant biologist, but their description of this animal made no sense to her.

He then brought them to the colony's two most intrepid cartographers, a pair brothers who had both gone to the desert many times by then, but neither of whom claimed to have ever even seen the tracks of such a creature.

Soon, the existence of this animal became another rumor, and thus persisted.

Then, one night, a single elderly Liseian appeared. She had not been a part of any previous visitations. She had a sharp sense of humor in spite of being very old. She introduced herself as 'Sister Olam,' congratulated the settlers for making it as far as they had, and gave them their third and final suggestion.

'In order to survive,' she said, 'you will have to take your oxygen suits through your western wood and over the mountains to where the desert begins. From there, you will have to go into the

desert, find and capture as many of the camels as you can, bring them back here, to the colony, and harvest the element from their moss. You will find that it is easily convertible into several month's supply of oxygen per drop for your entire colony to live off of.'

Thus, the next day, eight people set out west from the colony: Fisk, Loach, the biologist, the cartography brothers, Jomah and Ishaua (who were both ordered by Olam to assist), and Fisk's wife, a half-gibbon named 'Ena' (who insisted upon going as well).

The camel-herder then explained to his son that their journey was long, arduous, and better-told elsewhere than he himself could recall. He did, however, mention that, while they were gone, E and Kes collaborated to put on the first production of the Isthisian play.

The son asked what a 'play' was, and he had to be reminded by his father that the lung-havers had a way of thinking which was much different than that of their own kind. He was told that the Lung-havers made up accounts of things which never occurred called 'fiction,' that 'fiction' happened to a type of person who never existed called a 'character,' that such things were the product of a mostly-benign insanity symptomatic of being a vertebrate, that lung-havers were always doing something inside their head, that this activity was so reflexive and constant that one could almost say it was against their will, that though this activity was called 'thought' it was very different from the way in which Arachnids themselves experienced it, that it rendered many intelligent species of chordate incapable of hibernation or rest, that they burned like candles and sometimes did horrible things to themselves inside their own heads over and over and over again for no reason other than to have something to do, that this was because they had no control, that it was alright that they were this way, and that they supposedly sometimes did charming, pleasant, or even lovely things inside their heads as well.

The son then asked why the lung-havers made fiction and the father explained that it was because many vertebrates organize

themselves by emotional awareness in the same way that Arachnids organize themselves by electromagnetic frequencies, and that limited usage of language is required for emotional awareness to flourish whereas the electromagnetic field is entirely unaffected by language. This meant that, in order to maintain a level of collective coherence which came naturally to Arachnids, the Lung-havers had to perpetually constrain their language to patterns which simulated different versions of reality, and that this was the essence of fiction.

The son then told the father that he still did not understand, and then asked him to finish describing what had happened.

The father, after echoing the son's lack of understanding, nevertheless stated that the play was titled *Molly-Thaum*, that it was written under intriguing circumstances by an Isthisian explorer named 'Zalman Cassalandra' a long time ago in the Proto-Septarian court of Parcius the Second of Isthis, and that this work was well-known and beloved by many Lung-havers across the galaxy by the time of Jremmin's founding.

So, whilst the Dispatch of Eight made their trek through the wilderness, those who stayed behind set about keeping the colony in good spirits. And whilst the former had run-ins with mountain-ghouls and predatory fevulas, the latter had their own plethora of obstacles to overcome.

Getting close to their home, the camel-herder raised his crook in the air. He pointed it towards the two full moons and explained that the play was scheduled to be performed the annual night upon which both of Jremmin's moons were full. He then said that this night happened to be that same one upon which the Dispatch of Eight returned, saving the people of Jremmin for generations to come.

The legacy of those days, he said, had since become immortalized in many songs and writings.

The membership of the Settlement Council was reshaped through a series of referendums and renamed "the Council of Zoas"

(‘zoa’ being a respected and dignified title from antiquity, originally derived from the Prophecies of Albion).

Fisk became the first *zosima* or ‘zoa-chief’ in village history, and elected the two cartography brothers, the biologist, and Loach as his deputy-zoas.

Kes Esod soon matured and became the head of the village guard, and then a zoa himself many years later, as did his eldest son after him.

Upon Sister Olam’s request, the Liseians were gifted ownership of the land between the East River and the cliffs northeast of the village. There (somehow largely unaffected by the still-then-very-thin atmosphere) they built their temple which they named “Thel,” and have since dwelt therein.

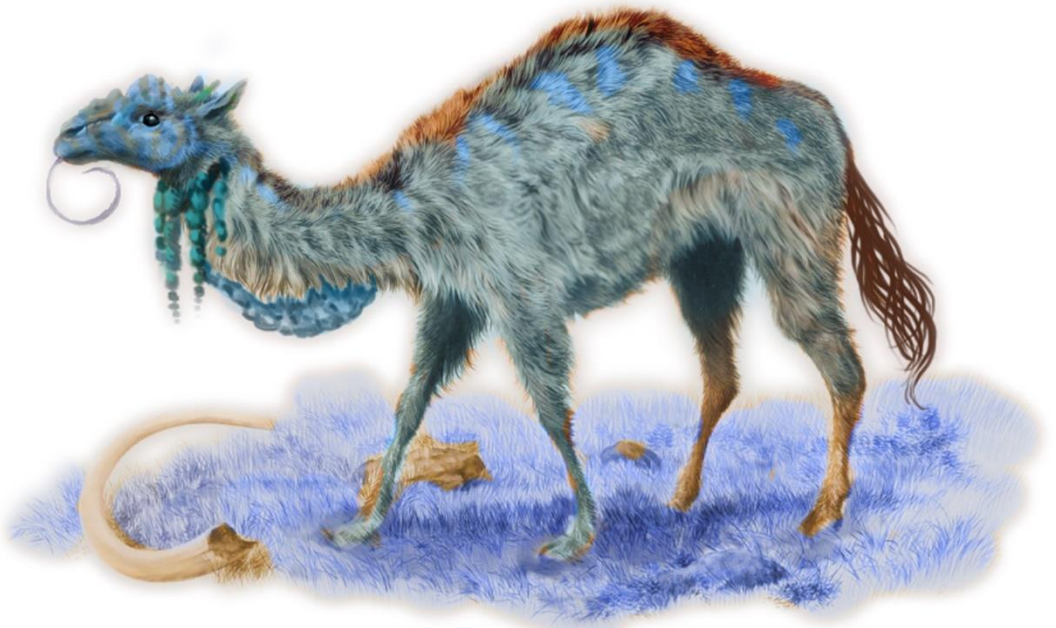
Ebsi soon became an elder, and then a sister. And then, she assumed Olam’s position as Headsister of the Liseian Order. She would, many years later, pass down this mantle to Sister Isha, who then passed it down to Sister Coral, who then passed it down to Sister Shoal, who then passed it down to Sister Röth, who most recently passed it down to Sister Rosemary, who shall someday pass it down to whoever.

Since then, the people of every race who lived in Jremmin flourished, and every Salvusday the lung-havers gathered together and staged their fiction in the playhouse near the center of town.

The son then asked what the biologist and cartographers’ names were, and the father responded that he could not recall, repeating his earlier statement that these events were better recounted elsewhere.

Thank you for reading!

Here are some illustrations, (characters not in sample included):





Amy

(minus blindfold)



Rosemary

(also minus blindfold)

Evry



Los

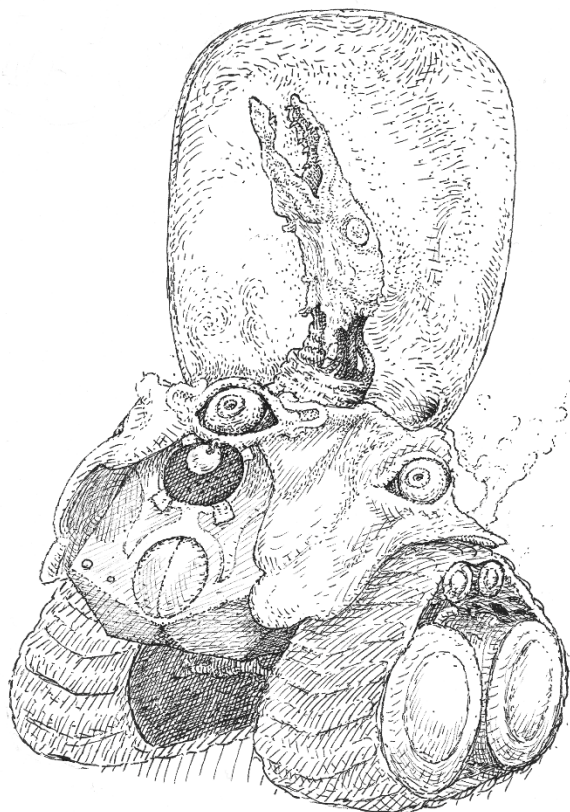


Avi



Somersault



[illegible]

Baaj







VISMUND





